

A RIVER CALLED TITASH: A STUDY OF COMMUNITY, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

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Abstract

Culture designates the shared social behaviour of a community that encompasses social habits, language, belief, food, cloths, music and arts and experience that shape their identity. Cultural materialism is the anthropological perspective that undertakes to incorporate the idea of the human societies with its rich fund of cultural heritage and the impact of the material world upon it. Among the unceasing list of river-centered narratives from Bengal *A River Called Titash* is a remarkable novel that brings forth the idea of human civilization. As a variety of European civilizations developed along the bank of rivers like- Rhine, Tigris, Euphrates, Nile etc. a rich cultural legacy was also evolved along the banks of river Titash. As a member of the Malo fishing community, Adwaita Mallabharman has deftly sketched the cultural vista of his society through his keen insight. The novel exquisitely deals with the multifarious cultural lifestyle like folk-language, folk-songs, festivals, religious stories and their livelihood in minute detail. Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival has been used in the context of festival life of the rural people of Bengal. In addition to it, the novel also depicts grinding Poverty and survival of the Malo people. The present research paper has consummately focused on Adwaita Mallabharman's novel *A River Called Titash* to examine the cultural identity of the Malo community who are marginalized from the mainstream Bengali society on account of their lower caste identity. This paper has further highlighted on how the cultural identity of a Bengali marginalized community has been dismantled under the domination of so-called Bhadrakol civilized society on the river bank of Titash.

Keywords: Adwaita Mallabharman, *A River Called Titash*, Malo community, Culture, identity, folklore, carnival.

Culture is the shared attributes of a group of people that encompasses place of birth, language, religion, cuisine, social behaviours, literature, art, music, ideas, rules, material dimensions etc. Some cultures are extended over a comprehensive area and a multitude of people are associated with those specific values, beliefs, place of origin, knowledge, and experience. Others have comparatively small scope and so are the people linked with that culture. However, the worth of a culture cannot be assessed by its size. No matter if a culture is observed within a small or widespread area, since old or modern times, has changed over the ages or remained the same, it can verily make us realize ourselves, others and the global community.

One of the conventions is that culture is organically and inextricably linked with community at the level of social ideas, views and practices. Culture and religion have close nexus in India so much so that the religious community and the cultural communities are sometimes used interchangeably set up around common faiths, value systems and mode of living. It is commonly held that these communities are associated together by interlinked structure and shared norms of life rather than by force and that they have been able to reconstruct themselves over time, by sustaining culturally obtained values and the ways of life. Therefore, conservation of culture then becomes indispensable for sustaining the community. And another postulation is that the definite identity of a community is to be realized in terms of its culture. It is generally acknowledged that the traditions and its practice in the society have had, or may still present, some functional values for the survival of the community.

Among the many insights which Gramsci put forward regarding culture was the view that culture encompasses the whole social life, not only its ideational aspects and that it is embodied in social practices and communal modes of living. He wrote of the 'common sense' of community, the large unconscious way in which people perceive the world. Common sense includes myths and symbols, ideas and experience and it can be often confused and contradictory. (Joseph, Sarah)

Adwaita Mallabarman, as a member of the lower caste, has given an account of the life of Malo community and their cultural atmosphere in the novel *A River Called Titash*. He was born on January 1, 1914 in a poor Dalit fishing family at the village called Gokarna in Brahmanbaria District in colonial Bengal. As a great artist, he lived a very short life. Fighting against poverty and Tuberculosis throughout his life, Mallabarman took his last breath on 16 April in 1951 at Narkeldanga in Kolkata in his own house at the age of 37. His famous novel *A River Called Titash* came into view as a complete book a few years after his death. In this novel, he had skilfully portrayed the trajectory of poor Malo Community of Bengal to which he belonged. *A River Called Titash* (Titash Ekti Nadir Naam) has been adopted into movie by the famous director Hrithik Kumar Ghatak in the year 1973. Adwaita Mallabarman had gained marvellous popularity in his short literary career whose masterpieces bring the readers to his roots.

The entire narrative of the novel is made of an atmosphere of folklore with all the essential details. Mallabarman has minutely depicted the multifarious cultural lifestyle of Malo people. In delineating the cultural activities, he has beautifully recorded the pain, misery and day to day events of the lower caste Malo community living in Gokarna (now in Bangladesh) on the banks of Titash river. In every episode of the novel, diverse cultural aspects like folk-festivals, religious stories, folk-language, folk-songs and folk-culture have been beautifully articulated. The whole novel seems to revolve around an economic circle. Apart from the joyful depiction of the life of Malos, the novelist has highlighted the economic life of the farmers as well. And at the end, we observe the battle for occupying the riverbed that comes up in the dry river, the destruction of the Malo civilization for

their disintegration and conversion to destitute labourers. In this altered economic background, the traditional life, belief and the folklore of the Malo community typically showcase their cultural identity. Furthermore, the vernacular language that Malo people use for representing their cultural belief has become their folk-language. Commenting on the novel *A River Called Titash*, professor Subodh Chaudhury observes,

I have seen Titash. I have seen the mountains and the sea. I have met many different people. But Adwaita Mallabarman had keen insight about human life, that we had not. We have seen it just as observer which might have enjoyed us. However, Adwaita saw in his eyes of an artist. Titash was in tune with his entity. He could not separate it, and he did not want to. His view was beautiful...He was proud for his identity. (Mukherjee 1)

It is a well-known fact that a painter implements all his thoughts in a painting with colour and brush, likewise, Mallabarman has thoroughly exposed his self-realization through the depiction of Malo society before the civilized society. Their manners, beliefs, norms, costumes, festivals, ceremonies, sports, language etc. could not escape his notice. In the second episode of the first chapter of the novel i.e., 'The journey Episode', there is an account of a celebration called *Maghmandal*¹, where the young unmarried girls observed a kind of ritual called *Maghmandal* in the month of *Magh*² so that "their marriage takes place one day to the music of shehnai flute and drum" (Mallabarman, 27). Such a celebration demystifies that their lives are propelled by traditional customs, festivals and rituals which is one of the popular features of the Malo society. In the same episode, in the month of *Chaitra*³ when the spring season is at its peak, the Malo people joyfully celebrate *Dol-Purnima*⁴ festival. Forgetting their dejected and pensive mood, all the fisheries become busy with festive joy. In this Dol festival, Kishore has succeeded in finding his beloved and the men and women smear coloured powder to one another. There is a romantic scene when Kishore's beloved applies colour on Kishore's cheeks. "In touching his cheek with color, her hands tremble, her heart flutters" (Mallabarman, 52). This romantic sketch of the author brings the innermost feelings of the readers to the fore.

In the 'Birth, Death, Marriage' episode, the entire Malo people get involved in solemnizing and celebrating the occasions. The *Annaprason*⁵ ceremony event is arranged at Kaloboron's house where the newborn baby takes first rice after its birth. The rich Malo families usually organized such ceremonies extravagantly. The celebration of such festive occasions were more magnificent than today's festivals. *Kali Puja* is the most celebrated festival in the Malo community. On the occasion of the *Kali Puja*, Malo people generally spend several nights for the performance of folk songs and plays (Mallabarman 113). In 'The Rainbow' episode, the Malo people recite the verses from *Padmapuran*⁶ at every house on the occasion of *Manasha*⁷ Puja throughout the month of *Sraban*⁸. In addition to it, the other festivals like *Durga*⁹ Puja, *Kali*¹⁰ Puja, *Laxmi*¹¹ Puja, *Bhai-Fonta*¹² etc. are widely popular in their

society. However, in comparison with other puja ceremonies, the expense of *Manasha Puja* is much less and the pleasure is more, so its celebration is more common in the Malopara. Apart from organizing *Manasha Puja*, the women folk organize a fake marriage ceremony, where one young woman proposes another young woman to enact *Behula-Laxmidhar*¹³ play. Actually, this *Jele* (fishermen) community lead an aquatic life on water for fishing. They worship *Manasha*, the goddess of snake and the water, so that the goddess blesses on them and protects them from the calamity in the river. The author has aptly established Mikhail Bakhtin's carnival theory in the application of folk cultural entertainments. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, he says,

The problem of carnival (in the sense of the sum total of all diverse festivities, rituals and forms, of a carnival type)—its essence, its deep roots in the primordial order and the primordial thinking of man, its development under conditions of class society, its extraordinary life force and its undying fascination. (Bakhtin, 122)

The instance of carnival festival has been used in the context of the daily life of the rural people of Bengal. It can be rightly said that Adwaita Mallabarman has embodied the carnival concept in various folk events and sports in the novel. The story of boat racing is reminiscent of the festive life of the carnival. We can cite myriad examples in the analysis of the narrative of the novel. The poor marginalized Malo people breathe a sigh of relief during such events.

Boat racing is another popular festival of the fishermen that take place in the month of *Chaitra*. Especially the people from Gokarna Ghat organize this competitive ceremony with great fanfare. The author's romantic imaginative mentality reveals through the description of the Chhadir Mian's boat making process. The author expresses Malo culture in the following lines:

Malo have their cultural life of their own. In songs and stories, in saying and folklore, that culture has a distinctive and vital beauty—woven into their festivities and religious celebrations, into their jokes and riddles, and into the language of self-expression in their everyday life. (Mallabarman, 233)

In the chapter 'The Journey Episode' of *A River Called Titash*, Basanti plays *Choari*¹⁴ (paper float) in the river on the occasion of *Maghmandal*. The making of this *Choari* is one of the patterns of folk art. The celebration of *Maghmandal* drawing *Alpana*¹⁵ (picture) design all over the yard is another tradition of the Malos. Through the painting of *Alpana*, the hopes and aspirations of the devotees are manifested. Again, the education and consciousness of the women can be seen through the design of such *Alpana* drawing (Mallabarman 28). On the occasion of *Kali-Puja*, another example of folk art is found through the construction of idols. In the words of the author,

The making of the image starts a month ahead. Even the huge bamboo framework they construct for the image brings wonder to Ananta's eyes. They need five days to set it up. When a boatload of straw comes, they make padded constructs of torsos and limbs of the central figure and other smaller figures by spirally winding jute string around measured bunches of straw. (Mallabarman, 106)

Therefore, construction of idols with mud can be regarded as an important part of sculpture industry which also highlights the expatriates of Malo people engaged in multiple activities.

Fishing is the only means of sustenance for the Malos and for this purpose, they need different varieties of nets which require spins for its preparation. In the novel, we notice that Ananta's mother has chosen spinning wheel as her source of income. Spinning and weaving are usually considered as a part of folk art. Making a variety of products made of wood enhances the excellence of folk art. In the novel, Kadir Mian's son Chhadir Mian hired four carpenters who cut the wood and made it into a boat. Then different types of images like leaves, vines, snakes, peacock wrestlers etc. are painted on it. These images are symbol of good fortune as well as the representation of competition. The thoughts of good and evil are always associated with the folk art.

Food is another inescapable aspect of culture of any society. A wide-ranging variety of food names find mention in the novel. As for evidence *Ganza*⁶ is deemed as a popular drug for the villagers. Malo people often revel in the night orchestra which is a popular source of enjoyment for them. On the occasion of *Poush Sankranti*⁷, the people of rural Bengal are busy making *Pitha*⁸ and *Payesh*⁹ which is considered to be the favourite food in rural Bengal. On the last day of *Poush*²⁰, that is, in the context of *Poush Sangkranti*, it is customary for the Malo community to make *Pitha*, a delicious food item. In the novel, it is noticed that the Malos started making rice powder a few days ahead of *Poush Sangkranti*. Sometimes they dry the rice powder in the sun so that it does not get spoiled. Ananta's mother, Basanti and Mongla's wife prepare *Pitha* at Ramkeshor's house throughout the night. In addition to it, they also make *Chatu*²¹ from the puffed rice. Actually, the author was born and brought up in the village, therefore, the descriptions of all these items are at his fingertips.

The people of the Malo community are physically healthy and sturdy. Most of the time, they have to work strenuously in the scorchy sunlight and specially those who sail boat for fishing have to go through sunny, rainy and stormy weather. As a result, their appearance becomes oily blackened, their clothing clarifies that they belong to the lower economic background. The older people usually wear clothes above the knee so that it is convenient for them to work. Many are seen wearing a cloth dividing it into two pieces due to an economic crisis. The villagers generally use *lungi*²², *Sando-Genji*²³ and a towel on the neck. Due to hard toil, the towel becomes very essential for wiping sweat. The young boys like Kishore, Subol wear a *Dhoti*²⁴ up to the feet while the women of Malo community

wear cotton sari in their own fashion. But of course, on the occasions of different festivals like *Maghmandal*, *Kali Puja*, special types of new clothes are observed.

People in the rural areas generally believe in various supernatural powers. They believe in different customs and traditions in their lives which is connected to their religion. Almost every character of this novel can be said to have been impelled by an atmosphere of religious belief. In 'The Journey Episode' when Kishore, Subal and Tilak arrange boats and set to go in exile, they 'chant the names of the five *Pir Babars*²⁵' (32). Besides it, they are members of Hindu community, they chant the names of *pir* of Muslims which indicate the inter-religious faith and their non-communal bonhomie. Although *Pirs* are Muslim saints, many Malo Hindus reverently respect and remember them. According to Sarah Joseph,

The widespread assumption that religious communities from homogeneous cultural communities has been a particularly unfortunate one. Cultural has many dimensions, material, ideational and social and these cut across the boundaries of religious groups. Religious groups in different regions have also evolve certain practices which help to distinguish the group within the larger whole but these by no means exhaust the concept of culture (Joseph, 1).

Religion is a very important and subtle subject in our country. The ordinary people of multiple religions were bounded forever by the traditional sense of brotherhood in this country. They were as much religious as they had the knowledge of religion; similarly, the secular mentality is always well endorsed by them. Malo people worship the materials associated with their livelihoods and various gods and goddesses. They are highly influenced by the *Vaishnava Mantra*²⁶ which is quite evident in Tilak's words. In the 'New Home' episode Malo people are seen to worship *Tulsi*²⁷ plants the leaves of which is considered as very sacred and used for religious ritual. The custom of Malos is viewed in 'Birth, Death, Marriage' episode, when Kaloboron's nephew takes birth. After giving birth to a child, he is made to bathe in the water of Titash. Such events showcase the importance of Titash river in Malo fishing community. And then "On the six day after the birth, a pot of ink and a pen are carefully placed in birth room. On that night *Chitragupta*²⁸ will come unseen to all, to write the baby's destiny on his forehead with the pen after dipping it in the pot of ink" (Mallabarman, 102). Adwaita Mallabarman has elaborated culture and customs of the Malos in detail and this depiction was possible for him successfully only because he was a child of that community.

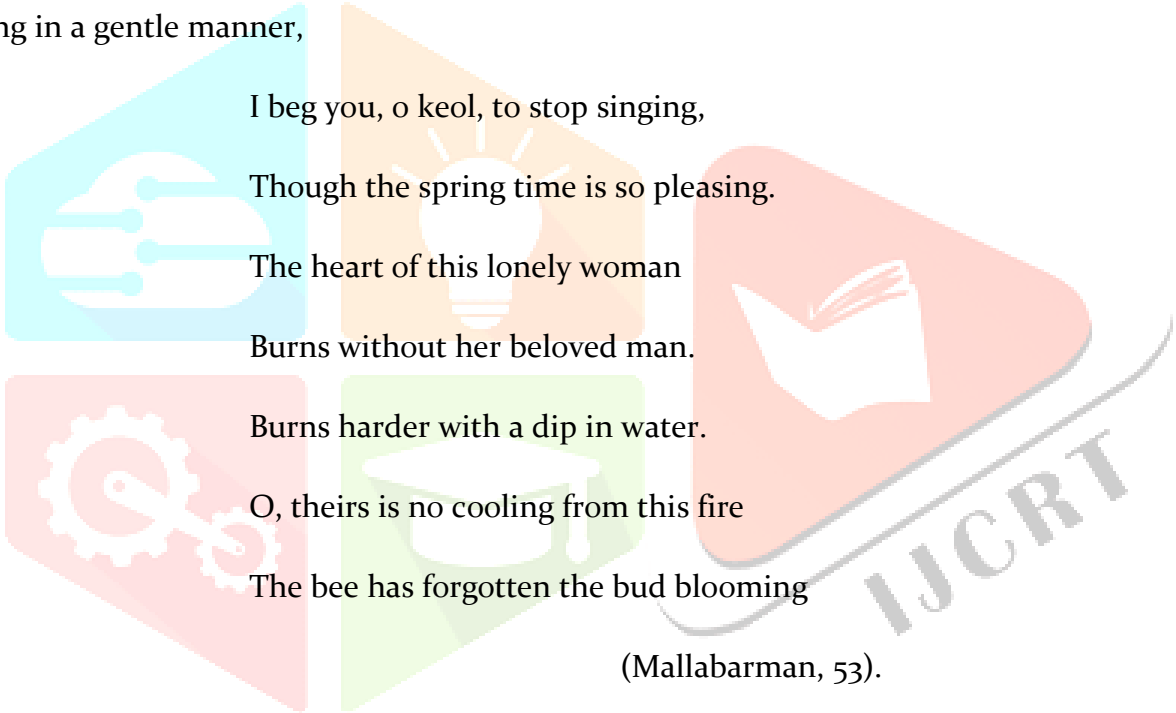
Folk music occupies a significant space in the Malo culture. The Folk music is played in festivals and the melodious songs are sung peacefully. On the occasion of *Maghmandal* celebration, from the first day to the last day of the month of *Magh*, the virgin girls take a bath in the morning in the Titash river and bring some *Saluk*²⁹ and *Durba*³⁰ flowers for worshipping stairs and chanted *Mantras*³¹ as

Please, sun god, take this sacred water I offer

Seven cupped handfuls I carefully measure.

(Mallabarman, 27).

These verses are not only just mantras but Mantra Sangit in the real sense. The songs which are sung on *Holi*³² festival in Shukdebpur village has been called Holi songs by the author. Many of the Malo people wish to play the role of the king of Holi, consequently, one of them is elected as the king of the festival. He is then dressed as the king wearing a crown of banana leaves, a garland of banana trunk and a torn and worn-out waistcloth. "From time to time he springs up to dance, bending and twisting his hips, and then slouches back to rest" (Mallabarman 52). The male singers are divided into two groups, one is Krishna's and the other as Radha's exchanging romantic songs in a rising voice. Thus, the singing competition continues between the two groups. In this way the Radha's side starts singing in a gentle manner,



I beg you, o keol, to stop singing,
 Though the spring time is so pleasing.
 The heart of this lonely woman
 Burns without her beloved man.
 Burns harder with a dip in water.
 O, theirs is no cooling from this fire
 The bee has forgotten the bud blooming

(Mallabarman, 53).

Krishna's side answer vigorously with a louder song.

The god of love, Madan, is here with spring—
 No more can I stay in alone, with my longing.
 Her husband gone far away,
 What's a woman to do, I say,
 How long her bosom to keep covering.

(Mallabarman, 53)

The first song is about love and pain that lies in the heart of a woman whose husband is absent from her. The second song that is sung in response, expresses the pain of a young woman, the burning pain of separation from her husband. All the Malo fisheries pick up their nets from the river on that day and join in the folk songs and play the drums. In every occasion like *Manasha Puja*, *Kali Puja*, during catching fish in the river and in the time of boat racing they sing such songs joyfully. Such songs are the lifeblood of the illiterate people of rural Bengal.

Culture is the backbone of a society, the abandonment of it means the annihilation of the existence of that society. Towards the end of the novel, it is seen that the rich culture of Malo community begins to fall apart. As a result of entering the fascinating night Orchestra of the modern city, the Malo society started striving to preserve its own cultural identity. The entire Malo society is divided into two groups except two members Mohan and Subla's wife, the whole Malo folk gathered at Kaloboran's house to enjoy the modern vulgar night opera forgetting everything else. Like *Igbo* culture of *Things Fall Apart*, the "Malos lose their self-identity. Their sense of personal integrity, distinction, and culture fades. The social ties of morality that had bound their community slacken and begin to fall" (Mallabarman 240). Thus, the modern culture of the upper castes gradually disintegrates the culture of the Malos. People cannot survive by clinging to the old, so they have to embrace the new. That is what has become very significant in the episode 'Double-Hued Butterfly' by its naming where the multiple colourful wings of the butterfly are actually the symbols of different cultures.

The novelist has skilfully portrayed different types of culture in his novel in his own unique style. In the rural Bengal we see unlettered, ignorant people and their culture mingled with superstitions, traditions, myths which is very much evident in the novel. The history of the Malos can be found in their culture and tradition which brings forth their rich fund of splendid heritage. Novels based on regional life are not uncommon in Bengali literature and they are copious in number. But in the novel *A River Called Titash*, the author has introduced us to a life-affirming reality of a community. The real picture of the Malo people that he experienced personally has been embodied with surprising indifference. Due to the close relationship with life, the novel has become interesting and incomparable.

Notes:

1. *Maghmandal*: A form of ceremonial sun-worship which is performed by the maidens of Bengal.
2. *Magh*: Name of a month in Bengali calendar (January and February).
3. *Chaitra*: It is the last month in the Bengali calendar (March – April).
4. *Dol-Purnima*: A kind of festival which is celebrated in a dignified manner by placing the idols of Radha and Krishna.
5. *Annaprasana*: A kind of organized ceremony where the baby takes its first food or first rice-eating ceremony.
6. *Padmapuran*: One of the eighteen major Puranas of Hinduism.
7. *Manasha*: The goddess of snakes.
8. *Srabana*: The fifth month in the Bengali calendar (August- September).
9. *Durga*: The major festival of Hindu religion, usually held for 10 days in the month of September / October.
10. *Kali Puja*: A very well-known Hindu festival dedicated to the Goddess Kali in the month of October or November.
11. *Laxmi*: The goddess of purity and wealth.
12. *Bhai-Fonta*: This festival is centred on rituals where sisters and brothers honour each other during Diwali.
13. *Behula-Laxmidha*: The protagonists in the Shiva Purana and the Manasamangal genre of Bengali medieval epics.
14. *Choari*: “About a cupid’s length cut from a young banana plant, pierced with a few thin bamboo sticks, becomes the base for a float-home constructed with colored paper” (Mallabarman 27-28).
15. *Alpana*: It refers to colourful sacred art, motifs or painting done with hands and paint which is mainly the power of rice and flour on the auspicious occasions in Bengal.
16. *Ganza*: Addiction or drug
17. *Poush Sankranti*: It is an auspicious day in Hindu culture occurred in January in Bengal.
18. *Pitha*: It is a kind of popular food in Bengal prepared from a batter of rice flour or wheat flour.
19. *Payesh*: a type of pudding from Bengal, made by boiling milk, sugar, and rice.
20. *Poush*: 9th month of the Bengali calendar (winter).

21. *Chatu*: A kind of flour made from puffed rice.
22. *Lungi*: A piece of clothing consisting of a round piece of cloth wrapped around the waist and worn by men.
23. *Sando-Genji*: A kind of additional attire that is worn as an undershirt.
24. *Dhoti*: Dhoti is the traditional attire for men across India, especially in Bengal.
25. *Pir Badars*: Muslim saints who guide and instruct religious process.
26. Vaishnava Mantra: one of the major types of modern Hinduism, characterized by devotion to the god Vishnu and his incarnations.
27. *Tulsi*: This (Holy Basil) is a kind of sacred plant in Hindu belief.
28. Chitragupta: The record keeper of Yama, the god of death.
29. Saluk: The flowers grow out of the water or float on the water surface.
30. *Durba*: A little wild grass having flowers that grow in garden or field.
31. *Mantras*: Mantras are the sacred utterance.
32. *Holi*: In Hinduism this is the festival of colours which symbolizes the colourful joy.

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Bio-note

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