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A Cultural Study of Malo Community in The Novel A River Called Titash

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Abstract

Culture designates the shared social behaviour of a community that encompasses social habits, language, belief, food, cloths, music, arts and crafts 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 rivercentered narratives from Bengal, A River Called Titash is a remarkable novel that brings forth the idea of human civilization. The rivers such as the Rhine, the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Indus and the Nile fostered numerous civilizations on their banks and provided livelihood to multiple communities of the world. Similarly, a community with its rich cultural legacy also evolved along the banks of river Titash. As a member of the Malo fishing community, Adwaita Mallabarman has deftly sketched the cultural vista of the 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 festivals of the rural people of Bengal. In addition to it, the novel also depicts grinding poverty and the survival of the Malo people. The present research paper focuses on Adwaita Mallabarman's novel A River Called Titash to examine the cultural identity of the Malo community who have been segregated from the mainstream Bengali society since ages on account of their lower caste identity. The paper further highlights as to how the cultural identity of a Bengali marginalized community is gradually dismantled under the domination of so-called Bhadralok civilized society on the bank of the river Titash.

Keywords: A River Called Titash, Malo community, Society, Culture, Identity, Folklore, Carnival.

Culture is the shared attribute of a group of people that encompasses place of birth, language, religion, cuisine, social behaviour, 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 merely by its size. No matter whether culture is followed within a small or widespread area, it can verily make us realize our identity and our relationship with others and the global community. Nowadays, the nexus of different countries with one another has given rise to the concept of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism and the whole world is increasingly being treated as a family.

One of the conventions is that culture is organically and inextricably linked with community at the level of social ideas, views and practices. In Indian sub-continent, culture and religion are so closely linked



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with each other that they are sometimes used interchangeably. Here, the cultural set up is broadly centered around common faiths, value systems and mode of living. It is commonly held that Indian communities reflect similar pattern of behaviour and shared norms of life. They have been able to reconstruct their social identity over time by sustaining culturally-obtained values and the ways of life. Therefore, conservation of the culture becomes indispensable for the survival of a community. The formation of identity of a community is inseparably seen in terms of its culture and tradition.

Cultural identity designates the identity of a person, his/her self-concept and interaction with people in the society. It incorporates religion, gender, class, race, ethnicity, nationality, region or the distinct traits or features of a social group. It may be individual-specific or group-specific where each member of the group shares the same cultural values and norms.

Communication theory of identity has given rise to the concept of cultural and racial identity. However, this theory provides 'four frames of identity' that facilitates our understanding of the process through which our identity is built and our self-conception is groomed. These frames can be represented as communal frame, personal frame, relationship frame and communication frame. The cultural taboos or constraints and the sense of right or the justice come under the purview of communal frame. Hence, cultural identity plays a pivotal role in building a person's self-examination, perception and relationship with the outer world. If we talk about the social sense or the community at large, the role of the dominant group is quite important here. In this case, one side of the coin refers to the dominant group of the center, the other the periphery or the margin where the powerless group lies.

There are different opinions about the social and cultural identities. The latter may be defined as the identification or the relationship of a group or of an individual in so far as they are connected with each other through the bonds of relationship, blood, kinship or friendship. Identity politics is also closely related to cultural identity in which groups of people with particular religious, ethnic, social or cultural identity endeavour to promote their interests and to redress their grievances. In the words of Janet Helms, identity may be defined as "a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perceptions that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (Helms 3). Another noted social theorist Weeks describes identity as:

About belonging, about what you have in common with some people and what differentiates you from others. At its most basic it gives you a sense of personal location, the stable core to your individuality...At the centre, however, are the values we share or wish to share with others. (Weeks 88)

In the society, we generally tend to assume others to be wrong. Actually, sometimes, we ourselves are at fault but we see our reflection in others. We presuppose them, provide some labels to them. In other words, we can say that what we claim for ourselves, we bestow on others. We generally try to internalize the pictures of ourselves that have their origin at some other external place.

Adwaita Mallabarman belongs to Malo fishing community which is considered as a lower caste in Bengali social order. He has given a poignant account of the life of Malo people 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 a village called Gokarna in Brahmanbaria District in colonial Bengal. As a great artist, he lived a very short span of life in this world. 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* was published as a complete book a few years after his death. In this novel, he skilfully portrayed the trajectory of poor Malo Community of Bengal to which



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he belonged. A River Called Titash (Titash Ekti Nadir Naam) was adapted into a movie by the famous director Hrithik Kumar Ghatak in the year 1973. The author gained immense popularity in his short literary career for his writings. The authentic depiction of the rural background in his narratives bring before the readers his close association with his community.

The whole novel is replete with folk-culture 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 clash for occupying the riverbed that comes up in the dry river. We also notice the destruction of the Malo civilization and their disintegration and conversion to destitute labourers. The poor 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 people. But Adwaita Mallabarman had keen insight about human life, that we have not. We have seen it just as observer which might have delighted us. However, Adwaita saw through the 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 of his identity. (Mukherjee 1)

It is a well-known fact that a painter paints all his thoughts and imaginations with his brush. Likewise, Mallabarman has thoroughly exposed his self-realization through the depiction of Malo society before the readers. 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 observe a kind of ritual in the moth 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 fishermen 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 new-born baby takes first meal after its birth. The rich Malo families usually organize such ceremonies extravagantly. The celebration of such festive occasions is more magnificent than today's festivals. *Kali Puja* is the most celebrated festival in the Malo community. On the occasion of *Kali Puja*, Malo people generally spend several nights during the performance of folk-songs and plays (Mallabarman 113). In 'The



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Rainbow' episode, Malo people recite 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. Hence, it is celebrated with pomp and gusto in Malo locality. Apart from organizing *Manasha Puja*, the women organize a fake marriage ceremony where a young woman proposes another to enact *Behula-Laxmidhar*¹³ play. Actually, this *Jele* (fishing) community leads an aquatic life on account of fishing. They worship *Manasha*, the goddess of snake and water in order to get her blessing and protection from the calamities 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 has been used in the context of the daily festival 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 also reminiscent of the carnival life of the people. We can cite myriad examples in the analysis of the novel. The poor marginalized Malo people breathe a sigh of relief during such events.

As mentioned earlier, boat racing is the popular festival of the fishermen that is organized in the month of *Chaitra*. Especially the people from Gokarna Ghat arrange this competitive ceremony with great fanfare. The author's romantic and imaginative temperament is revealed through the description of the Chhadir Mian's boat making process. The author beautifully 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 artistic description of *Choari* is one of the patterns of folk art. The celebration of *Maghmandal* by drawing *Alpana*¹⁵ (picture) design all over the yard is another notable tradition of the Malos. Through the painting of *Alpana*, the hopes and aspirations of the devotees are adroitly manifested. Again, the knowledge of art and the creative consciousness of the women can be seen through the design of the *Alpana* drawing (Mallabarman 28). On the occasion of *Kali-Puja*, the construction of idols is also a good example of folk art. 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, the construction of idols with mud can be regarded as an important part of the 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 part of folk art. Their artistic sensibility is also reflected in the production of furniture. In the novel, Kadir Mian's



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son Chhadir Mian hires four carpenters who cut the wood and prepare a boat and then they paint different types of images like leaves, vines, snakes, peacock wrestlers etc. on it. These images are the symbols of good fortune as well as competitive temperament. The concept of good and evil are always associated with this folk art.

Food is another inescapable aspect of culture in any society. A wide-ranging variety of food names find mention in the novel. For example, $Ganza^{16}$ is deemed as a popular drug among the villagers. Malo people often revel in the night orchestra which is a great source of enjoyment for them. On the occasion of $Poush\ Sankranti^{17}$, the people of rural Bengal are busy making $Pitha^{18}$ and $Payesh^{19}$ which is considered to be the favourite food for them. On the last day of $Poush\ Sankranti$, it is customary for the Malo community to make Pitha, a delicious food item. In the novel, it is noticed that the Malos make rice powder a few days ahead of $Poush\ Sankranti$. 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 during the whole night. In addition to it, they also prepare $Chatu^{21}$ 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 scorching 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. The garments that they wear reflect their lower economic background. The older people usually wear clothes above their knees which is convenient for them to work. Many villagers are seen wearing only one cloth by dividing it into two pieces due to economic crisis. The poor generally use *lungi*²², *Sando-Genji*²³ and a towel on their neck. Due to hard toil, the towel becomes very essential for wiping sweat. The young boys like Kishore, Subal wear a *Dhoti*²⁴ up to the feet whereas the women of Malo community wear cotton sari in their own fashion. But of course, on the occasion of different festivals like *Maghmandal*, *Kali Puja*, special types of new attires are worn.

People in the rural areas generally believe in various supernatural powers. They follow different customs and traditions which is very much 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 are ready to go in exile, they 'chant the names of the five *Pir Badars* '25 (32). Although they are members of Hindu community, they chant the names of *Pir* of Muslims which indicate the inter-religious faith and their communal bonhomie. Even though *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 sensitive subject in our country. The ordinary people of different religions are bounded by the strong sense of brotherhood in the society. They are simple, downtoward and secular in all walks of their lives. They avoid communal acrimony and mutual hatred. Malo people worship various gods and goddesses and the materials associated with their livelihood. 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 very sacred and used for spiritual activities. The customs of Malos can be seen in 'Birth, Death, Marriage' episode, when



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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 sixth day after the birth, a pot of ink and a pen are carefully placed in the 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). The author has appropriately elaborated the culture and customs of the Malos in great detail and this depiction is possible for him only because of his close association with that community.

Folk music occupies a significant space in the Malo culture. Such musical concerts are organized during festivals. People sing the romantic and melodious songs enchantingly. On the occasion of Maghmandal celebration, from the first 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 to worship stairs and chant $Mantras^{31}$ 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 the eve of *Holi*³² in Shukdebpur village are addressed as 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 koel, 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 answers 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 fishermen pick up their nets from the river on that day and join the folk songs and play the drums. In every occasion like *Manasha Puja*, *Kali Puja*, while catching fish



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in the river and in the time of boat racing, they sing such songs joyfully. These 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. By entering the fascinating night Orchestra of the modern city, the Malo society starts striving to preserve its own cultural identity. The entire Malo society is divided into two groups—one, standing in favour and the other, against the modern city culture. Excluding two members i.e., Mohan and Subla's wife, the whole Malo folk assemble at Kaloboran's house to enjoy the modern vulgar night opera forgetting their own musical heritage. 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 shatters the culture of the Malos. People cannot survive by clinging to the old, so they have to embrace the new. It is quite significant in the episode 'Double-Hued Butterfly' 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 the novel in his own unique style. In the rural Bengal, the culture of the unlettered and ignorant people gets mingled with superstitions, traditions and myths which is quite evident in the novel. The history of the Malos can be found in their specific culture and tradition which brings forth their rich fund of splendid heritage. Novels based on regional life are not scant in Bengali literature but are copious in number. However, in the novel *A River Called Titash*, the author has presented before the readers a life-affirming reality of a community. The real picture of the Malo people that he experienced personally has been presented authentically with his surprising artistic creativity. Due to the close attachment with life and livelihood of the Malo community, the novel becomes interesting and incomparable in the literary world.

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. *Annaprason*: 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. *Sraban*: 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.



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- 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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