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Poverty and Hunger for Identity: Tradition Versus Modernisation in Biswal's *The Starved*

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Abstract

The paper examines the central theme of tradition versus modernisation in the play, *The Starved (Bhukha)* by Mangalu Charan Biswal, which delves into a socio-cultural context and focuses upon five Bajanias, rural folk performers who become poverty-stricken and culturally subjugated because of their low caste, passion for traditional livelihoods and the replacement of modernisation into traditional practices. The paper aims to study the conflict between tradition and modernization and its impact on the poor and marginalised people. The dominance of modernisation predicts the downfall of a long-preserved culture and its practices. The paper tries to suggest possible solutions to the problems shown with possible further studies on the same topic.

Key Words: Tradition, Modernisation, Modern world, Culture, Bajanias.

Introduction

Humans are narcissists in nature. In the quest for a more developed and comfortable life, they always have an unreasonably high sense of their own importance. Earlier, most of them lacked the capability to understand or care about other things such as the environment, other animals and whatever exists except them. But the more society flourishes towards modernism, even more they do not care about their own species. In the name of modernisation, people tend to forget their own traditions and culture. The great poet and critic, T.S. Eliot, in his critical essay, "Tradition and Individual Talent" says tradition expresses continuity with the past. Our present experience of it is part of who we are. Paul Ricoeur writes in his book, *History and Truth*, that "The phenomenon of universalization while being an advancement of mankind at the same time constitutes a sort of subtle destruction not only of traditional cultures which might not be irreparable wrong

but also of what I shall call for the first being the creative nucleus of great cultures that nucleus based on which we interpret life.” (Recoeur 276) The great philosophers never deny avoiding the tradition of any culture. They even, warn If any culture attempts to avoid it, the consequences will go to the people of the culture itself. Five Bajaniyas from the book, *The Starved* are the exemplary of such cultural destruction.

Dr Mangalu Charan Biswal is one of the most prominent Odia playwrights, poet and Short story writers. He contributes about fifty-seven books to the Indian Literature. His writings are the picturisation of the common people and cultural heritage of Sambalpur, Odisha. Biswal originally wrote the play in Sambalpuri language (an Indo-Aryan Language from western Odisha) in the title *Bhukha*, which refers to someone hungry. The play was adapted into a movie with the same name in 1989. Then, it became the first film from Odisha to win the prestigious international award at the Gijjon International Film Festival in Spain. The play is translated by Dr Nirjharini Tripathy with the English title *The Starved*. Dr Tripathy is an Indian writer from Odisha and an Associate Professor in the Department of English at Utkal University, Bhubaneswar, Odisha.

According to the class system in India, Brahmins are at the top and these people who play traditional folk musical instruments for the amusement of upper-class people, are in the bottom. These people mainly traditional musicians live under the mercy of upper-class people. This is the essential reason that they are more dependent upon other upper-class people for their livelihood. What is so fearful for them is that If they fail to amuse, they will lose their everyday meal. They give amusements with their music in festivals, rituals and marriages to the upper-class people. This tradition has been practised a long year before.

Biswal portrays the five Bajaniyas as the front-line characters in the play to represent the whole community of that particular place who are untouchables, poor, culturally subjugated and have less value in the community. Aentha, Mahaguru, Hadu, Paltu, Gahadu, are the traditional musical instrumentalists and main characters. They play traditional folk musical instruments called “Pancharasi” or “Panchabadya.” Traditionally, these instruments are played by the Harijana caste known as Ganda in Sambalpur. The music is also known as Ganda baja (Ganda instrument), and the instrumentalists are known as Bajniyas. There are five famous instruments played by Bajaniyas such as Dhol, Nissan, Tasa, Jhanj and Mahuri. Sambalpuri folk music is incomplete without any of the instrument above. They play all the instruments together with proper tune and rhythm and the sounds spread harmony in the environment. People connect harmony with divinity. According to the local people, this harmony calls the local gods and goddesses. But the sad reality is they have

no value despite having the ability to evoke the divinity with their instruments. but, the Ganda people are considered untouchable because Dhol, the musical instrument is made with cowhide. But they have no contact with cowhide. Ironically, the instrument and its harmony are acceptable in society but not the people who just play these. However, these Bajanias are spiritually and culturally more powerful than any common person, no matter in which caste he or she belongs to.

However, traditionally, Bajanias at least get almost all the things for their livelihood except respect from the wealthy people. But the arrival of modern music becomes the barrier to the livelihood of these people. The replacement of modern music makes most of the traditional and folk musicians unemployed. In the play, Biswal's five Bajanias see the same. The plot revolves around them and their "depredations, and the tragic life of poverty and starvation of each of these people". (Tripathy 6) Now people have started to prefer modern music which results negatively in the job of Bajanias. They are forced to find other jobs despite having talent in folk music. They lack farming and any other business to feed their family. In a way, modern music snatches food and lives from these people. They have not just lost their livelihood but modernisation snatches their identity as folk musicians.

Discussion:

"Tradition" and "modernisation" are widely used as the polar opposition to each other. Nowadays, people proceed with modernist ideas ignoring their traditional values and identity. They forget the importance of their past. But in reality, they are the two sides of a coin. Modernisation is essential for the betterment of society and in the improvement of human lives whereas tradition plays a vital role in the foundation of a modern world. The gap between the two may threaten the downfall of a culture. India has a rich variety of cultures and that is what makes it prominent in the world. Biswal has chosen a place, Sambalpur which becomes a microcosm of cultures in India. In that place, five characters and their struggle drive the whole plot. Miserably, no one is there to voice their problem in front of authorities. Asim, a learned researcher by submitted his research thesis on them, wanted to expose their problem to the government but eventually, he was put in jail because of some issues against the government. The development of modern music has pushed these people to death. People who have money, they run behind modern music. These people are illiterate and lack anything to make them modernised. The emptiness in their mind becomes the reason for the emptiness of their stomach. They wait for specific rituals to be performed with their music. They get a very low payment. If any year, they are unable to get a job in the ritual, the situation becomes more tragic. They often wonder

that how long they will perform their traditional folk music which is becoming unpopular day by day. Here the concern should be on preserving the folk tradition. This is a kind of threat to the society that the death of the folk tradition may bring the culture into the same way.

The plot begins with the indication of Biswal to the tradition and its value to the Bajania people. Paltu who plays Nisan, a musical instrument with a broad top and tapered bottom, gives a very heart-touching statement that “What is music without a Drum and what is a king without a kingdom.” (Tripathy 36) Bajanias give so much value to their tradition to a great extent. They have enough love and passion for their work. But, what horrifies them is having a great tradition, they are still struggling to get a handful of rice to eat, and they need to find it out somewhere every day. The hunger trapped them in a way that their life becomes more like hell. Mahaguru’s statement, “If I open my underfed mouth, you can see all my thirty-two teeth jutting out,” (Tripathy 36) shows how they are both mentally and physically struggling in their life. Hardu responses “We all suffer the same fate brother.” (Tripathy) “Fate” becomes a bad fortune for them. Questions arise, who creates this fate for them? If they are so much hard working and have passion for their work then why is fate not favouring them?

Death also cannot be overcome by poverty and hunger. Homes become empty. Characters always struggle to live a life. Earlier, Mahaguru has lost his child and his beautiful and charming wife lost her physique and is yet to die. Some characters become barren and they only concern about their food, they do not have families to mourn which makes them sadder. Hardu says “Time and situation are not steady. Fate changes as and when god wishes it to.” (Tripathy 38) Now they use god. These innocent people know that they people are the sole reason of their situation but they positively indicate the reason for their poverty is their fate and god. People means modernised people. They have lost their taste of tradition and culture.

Bajanias have a very less money and what they earn in the day is exhausted by the evening. On certain occasions, they are only able to earn a meagre pay of two hundred or four hundred rupees. This earning total again is divided among them. Their penurious life leads to a miserable life. They are looking more aged than actually they really are. They chose alcohol as the replacement for rice. They are aware of the imperfect replacement but they do not have any option left. Only intoxication can remove their pain of hunger. Gahadu says

A few shots of booze may soothe this hunger

Pangs of our starving stomachs, brother!

They do not have even five rupees money to buy alcohol. They go to Aentha, he even does not have. The situation is so tragic. Everyone's situation is so similar. They lack money at least to get relief from their pain.

The introduction of the character, Asim into the plot raises the ray of hope in the heart of all the Bajanias. He is a learned fellow and has ability to open this big issue of these people and their situation in front of the government. He knows well that India is a welfare state but still, there are people who are free from necessary needs. Asim comes to Aentha's home for an investigation of his thesis. Also, he says them, his purpose is to write about these lower caste people who are free from all the benefits given by the government. With this work, he will get a decent job. Now people start worshipping him because hope is raised and they also somehow know if their situation will be public, it can be better. Asim gives them hope with his words, "I will write a great book on them. Your names and pictures will be printed on it and many will know you. The entire nation will come across your name." (Nirjharini 63) Recognition only can save these poor people from their harsh situation that what he knows very well. For a short period of time, Asim's hope and what he passes on to these people make these people comfortable and happy. Asim says he is "Bhukha" and he is in search of all the "Bhukha" like him in the society. "Bhukha," that is hunger is not all about lack of food but rather to be passionate about doing something great. In the eyes of Asim the hunger for searching this minority and marginalised people to make their identity in front of the government. Asim comes to know that these people do not get any business with their music. They get to play on some occasions. If there is a drought any year then the situation becomes worse for them. Aentha says

This year we didn't get rain at all. There is drought everywhere... People having any money whatsoever call us for music and entertainment.

Money results in welfare.

But those having a little money, want modern music. Why will they ask for our archaic music? I wonder.

Aentha has the knowledge about the situation and condition of their culture. The modern music is the factor and reason to be responsible for their hunger. Additionally, their culture is almost dead. Hunger and poverty are continuously portrayed throughout the play. In the third scene, the mention of Pushapuni, a famous festival in Odisha, shows that they need some necessary things to celebrate the festival and buy dresses but the lack of money makes them challenged to do so for their family. These people cannot afford joy. Phoola, the

daughter of Aentha cries for a new dress because her only dress is so bad that the stitched place tore “like a wide-open mouth.”

But the tragedy happens in the plot when their only hope of Ray fades. Asim gets arrested by the police. No one knows the reason. But everyone suspects in his writing he wrote against the government so that the government arrest him. Once, Asim believes in the humanity.

I just understand humanity.

Humanity is everything.

Humanity is caste.

Humanity is my mother and father.

Humanity is everything.

Now humanity brings him into custody. He mentions about the haves and have-nots in his research. If he should not write about these people, who will write? The government is not doing anything for these people. But the only risen voice is collapsed by them. If Telling the truth is the result of going to jail, then what will happen to the marginalised people? This is very shocking that the government is not taking any responsibility to save any culture or people. The clash between tradition and modernisation ends with the devastation of the Bajaniyas community and their tradition. Those who were the sole reason for continuing a beautiful heritage and tradition can only get peace after their death.

Some possible solutions for the clash are that Bajaniyas could find ways to adapt their traditional practices for modern relevance. Promotion of cultural awareness, and educating people about the rich culture and tradition can also help. Development of business skills like to sell the equipment of Bajaniyas. Partnerships with NGOs and Educational Institutions can take the improvements to the pick.

Conclusion:

Biswal's "Bhukha" or the translated version by Dr Tripathy's "The Starved" goes beyond the unique characteristics of the Bajnia people. It offers an insightful examination of the human condition and sufferings, emphasising the constant conflict between tradition and modernisation. The drama acknowledges our need for saving tradition while forcing us to think about the value of cultural legacy. "Bhukha" makes us consider if it is possible to forge a path that respects our heritage while welcoming the prospects of development and change via the characters' need for identity. But not in a sense that modernism becomes oppressor and the tradition goes down to die.

Further study:

This study opens up new avenues for investigation. Future research could focus on:

The development of the Bajnia Dombo community's art form and its historical setting.

a comparative examination of how different Indian marginalised populations have struggled with modernity.

the part played by laws and educational programmes in promoting the preservation of traditional artistic forms.

the possibility of incorporating conventional art forms into modern cultural settings.

Through analysing these facets, we may get a more profound comprehension of the concerns brought up in

"Bhukha" and participate in current discussions around customs, personalisation, and cultural identity in an

increasingly interconnected world.

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