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Imagining The Other: A Comparative Study Of Indigenous Communities In Arun Joshi's *A Strange Case Of Billy Biswas And* Mahasweta Devi's *Douloti*.

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Abstract:

Tribal India finds very little representation in Indian English literature; and on the rare occasion that it does, the indigenous is almost always looked upon as the 'noble savage' whose culture is pristine yet primitive. They are portrayed as lacking agency, far removed from modernisation and resistant to change or adaptation. In contrast, a study of indigenous and bhasha writing on tribal people reveals a level of representation that is sensitive and not exoticized. Their characters are not stereotypes that lack authenticity and vigour.

On the basis of Edward Said's study of all European Orientalist discourse as always already inscribed within the Orientalizing paradigm, it can be said of Indian English writing as continuing the colonial legacy of further alienating and othering the indigene. As such indigenous literature can be positioned in opposition to colonial ideology, an ideology understood to permeate and thus invalidate all non-indigenous representations of native people. Especially notable is the representation of women in both these categories. While indigenous writing portrays women as playing powerful roles in the face of exploitation both social and sexual; Indian English literature seems to have reduced them to caricatural depictions of voluptuous and exotic beauties that are the objects of desire.

This paper attempts a comparative study of the representation of tribal people, their life and struggles in Arun Joshi's *A Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and Mahasweta Devi's story *Douloti.* In sharp contrast to the idyllic and romantic portrayal of the tribal world in Joshi's novel, is the brute reality of tribal life and its struggles for survival in Mahasweta Devi's work.

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(**Key words:** tribal, indigenous, representation, Other, Arun Joshi, Mahasweta Devi)

The term 'tribe' is derived from the Latin word 'tribua' meaning a political unit, extending over time to include social groups defined by the specific territories they occupy. Although there is no consensus on the definition of a tribe in an anthropological sense, tribes are generally considered to be social groups "...bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory. Members of a tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of a nation" (Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, 769). Current usage of the term includes numerous and varied communities scattered all over the globe, variously called "aboriginal people" or "indigenous people". In India it denotes original inhabitants or 'adivasis'. Whatever be the varied sense and meaning of what constitutes a tribe, the one thing that is common to them is a history of exploitation and marginalisation.

The historian Romila Thapar observes that it was with the coming of the Aryans that the indigenous inhabitants of India came to be regarded as "barbarians". The Sanskrit word *mleccha* can be traced etymologically to Sumerian and Pali where it is used to refer to people who spoke an indistinct language. Later on in history it was extended to different castes, forest- dwelling tribes, foreigners and people of other languages and religions too. From this initial linguistic distinction, it was a short way to the cultural associations of difference, alienness, otherness and backwardness. The discourse was sustained through religious and secular texts in Sanskrit that created and legitimised the concept of Aryan superiority over indigenous inferiority in all aspects of race, culture, and language. The caste system and ideas of ritual status and purity compounded these hierarchies. The segregation of the people according to caste and ritual status was accompanied by demarcation of geographical location too, and today's "tribal areas" were the *mleccha deshas* of yesteryear. The process of marginalisation was accelerated during the British colonial period in Indian history. The political and economic interests of the British saw the large-scale exploitation of forests and land for resources like timber and mineral, and the tribals were robbed of their traditional habitats and means of livelihood. With the imposition of new administrative and legal measures by the British, the tribals lost their traditional lands and were forced to work as agricultural labourers under the exploitative zamindari system. The British also introduced the bonded labour system which compounded the exploitation, creating a new class of native exploiters in zamindars, middlemen, money-lenders and contractors. The tribals were effectively pushed into terrible poverty and debt, vulnerable to violent repression and exploitation that continued into the post-independence era. Along with economic deprivation and landlessness, tribals have had to

witness the slow but sure death of their distinctive cultural identity. Some narratives of this period described the tribals as barbarians and deceivers. Administrative reports and legal documents of the British period gave evidence of this kind of attitude of the British towards the tribals.

Tribal cultures are predominantly oral and though there are more than ninety tribal languages in India, the majority of them do not have scripts. Although orality has been a part of India's cultural traditions, the dominance of the written tradition and the introduction of printing in the nineteenth century effectively sealed the fate of many of the tribal languages and cultures. Unable to "write" themselves into the history of the nation, their contribution to India's rich and varied heritage remained unrecognised and unrewarded even in the post-independence Indian nation. They live lives that witness constant and often humiliating struggles with society, the state and its machinery to maintain their tenuous hold on their history and their distinct ethnic and cultural identity. This reality has rarely been represented in Indian English Literature. Writers who wrote in Indian languages (though they are not a homogenous lot) seem to have a better understanding of Tribal India than the Indian English writers.

A comparative study of these groups sets each group's narrative practices in relief, suggesting avenues for analysis and theories that are less obvious when texts produced by either group are considered on their own. Differences between the two groups provide an important entry for theorising about the forms of postcolonial hybridity at work even within the nation-state paradigm. Moreover comparisons highlight the often hidden context of neo-colonialism operative within the framework of the post-independent nation. Both the advent of postcolonial theory as well as post-independence rhetoric have obscured the ongoing colonised status in which the indigene continues to exist.Arun Joshi's novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) revolves around Bimal (Billy) Biswas and his encounter with the tribals. Billy Biswas is the son of a Supreme Court judge. He is sent by his father to the United States to study Engineering. However, he studies anthropology there. He reads books on tribal attitudes and customs and is enamoured by them. Billy's interest in the tribals dates back to his youth, when at the age of fourteen he watched a tribal dance and felt that he belonged to that tribe. After some years, Billy returns to India to become a professor of Anthropology. Billy Biswas is obsessed with primitiveness. During this period, he undertakes a number of expeditions to investigate primitive communities. His obsession is a result of his dislike for modern civilisation. Primitivity is something that is considered the opposite of modernity or as something which is pre-modem. He studies anthropology to explore the world of

primitivism. Anthropology, in principle, advocates an equal interest in societies of all types. But here it has been reduced to the study of primitive society. In addition, Billy reads the *National Geographic Magazine*, which has a coverage of the tribal treatises on black magic, witchcraft and so on. It should be noted here that anthropology as a discipline is itself the product of colonialism, and was set up with the aim of studying primitive society for better administration and has a record of describing them as exotic and as the 'Other.' In the same manner, *The National Geographic Magazine* also has negative things to say about the tribals. In their book *Reading National Geographic*, Lutz and Collins have commented that this magazine portrays the tribals as " 'exotic,' 'idealized,' 'naturalized,' and 'sexualized' ."

Before Billy disappears into the forests of the Maikala Hills, he writes a letter to his Swedish friend, Tuula Lindgren, telling her about his frequent dreams of a strange woman:

> A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Benares .Yes this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand. (p.93)

This vague image is later concretised in the form of Bilasia, the Bhil woman whom he finds an ideal combination of Otherness and the Self. Bilasia's exotic Otherness is clearly seen in her "untamed beauty", her promiscuity and her obvious difference from the respectable wife, Meena. Yet, how is Bilasia an ideal other for Billy Biswas, the upper-class Hindu? Perhaps this may be explained by the way tribals have generally been viewed as peripheral communities within the dominant Hindu fold. Billy penetrates tribal society as an outsider and a benefactor, and continues to remain as such until the very end as evidenced by his essentialising of the tribal woman in the form of Bilasia.

Mahasweta Devi is perhaps the most widely translated Indian writer working in an indigenous language today. She took up the case of the tribal people of India through political activism and writing. She spent over thirty years working with and for the tribal people of Bengal and South East Bihar as a political anthropologist, investigative journalist and editor of 'People's Magazines'. G. N. Devy believes that Mahasweta has "managed to transcend so many prisons to become what she is". He wonders:

> What is the source of her remarkable memory, the frightening economy of her words, that great simplicity, which, having distributed life between the necessary and the unnecessary,

shuns all that is unnecessary? Is she an adivasi taken to literature, or a writer drawn to the adivasi? (p. 176)

The majority of the critical writing on Mahasweta's works focus on the aspect of social commitment in her writing, viewing her mainly as a realistic writer who uses her fiction as another weapon in her crusade for human rights on behalf of the tribals, women and other marginalised people. Mahasweta Devi's efforts have been to help the indigenous people in reviving their past and to give them a pride of place. Unlike writers who were stimulated by tribal exotica and chose to romanticise and idealise tribal societies, Mahasweta Devi does not present a romanticised picture of the tribal people. Instead, she portrays the poverty-stricken and insecure lives of the tribal people for whom rice remained an eternal dream, where life meant wandering from one village to another due to ceaseless eviction by the 'dikus,' (the native Zamindars, small kings and petty police officials) for whom land reclaimed from the forest was the basis of tribal life.

Mahasweta Devi's descriptions of places like Singhbum, Palamu, Chakradharpur, Chaibasa, the Koel river and a number of villages situate her fiction in a locale that is historically and geographically. Her retention of tribal terms adds to the localisation of her texts. She also assimilates in her diction a number of English words. One noted example is that her tribal characters pronounce the word 'jail' as 'jehel,' and government as 'gormen'. Her use of polyglot diction, 'chalit' Bengali proverbs and idioms is also an additional effort to achieve an authentic specificity. The songs and dances of the tribals which form an integral part of their struggle find their due place in these novels. Thus, these narratives tactics together record the tribal past and add to their documented history: they narrate their glory while telling us what happened to them and what they lost. In "Douloti the Bountiful" Mahasweta Devi highlights the problems of women as bonded labourers. In this story, Crook Nagesia's fourteen-year-old daughter Douloti is taken away to the city by Paramananda Mishra the middleman on the pretext of marriage. Douloti is fooled into thinking that he will marry her, but she realises only to late that she has been sold to a brothel. The story ends with Douloti collapsing on 15 August at the flag-post signifying her bondage even after several decades of Independence.

Mahasweta does not eroticise tribal sexuality. As Imogene Hansdak points out: "Mention of dances, courtship rituals and erotic nudity are conspicuously absent from her writings". She also does not celebrate the tribal woman's sexuality, rather using it as an instrument of change. Having

said that, it must be acknowledged that Mahasweta's works are limiting in their binary oppositions and idealisation of the suffering poor. While Joshi reifies the indigenous as an exotic 'Other', Devi's ideology, activism and reforming zeal perhaps prompt her to view tribal people as a forever struggling lot. In her objective of drawing the attention of the mainstream to the injustice and suffering of the tribal people, her representation of them is Neo-colonially global. As Spivak writes the erstwhile displaced space of Empire is now inhabited and negotiated by the Nation and the national map. I would like to conclude the paper by quoting the last two lines of the story that end in a rhetorical yet evocative question. As Mohan, the school teacher prepares for the flag hoisting ceremony on Indian Independence Day, he discovers the bloody and deceased body of Douloti sprawled on it: "What will Mohan do now? Douloti is all over India."

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