

The River as a character in Advaita Mallabharman's A River Called Titash

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ABSTRACT

Rural Bengal has always been the living, breathing representation of a sacred bond between Man and Nature- the raw reflection of human lives inextricably linked to the soil and the waters one is born amongst. Advaita Mallabharman's A River Called Titash is one such translated Bengali novel which earthily brings forth this theme weaved within criss- crossing stories that are tied to the waters of Titash. This little known book, containing a wealth of the essence of rural Bengal enhanced through the use of native, simple Bengali, interspersed by the festivals and customs that breathe of the very roots of the Malo community, serve to emphasize the universal truth of the significance of Nature in the lives of men. Centuries of development may have taken humanity much farther from the plight of the Malo community, yet no modern magic of technology has yet given humanity the key to master Fate. Mallabharman shows this very fact of the omnipotence of Fate as personified by the river Titash. My paper seeks to explore this personification- wherein the river, exercising its fatal faculty, emerges more of a character than the humans exercising their verbal faculty.

Keywords: *river, Titash, society, identity, character, Fate, Malo community, folk songs*

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*“Our little river flows in graceful loops
The summer heat dries her to a gentle flow,
Both cart and cattle travel across with ease
Her banks are high, her depths are shallow.”*

*“When the rain descend, the river swells fast
Rushing waters raise voice in happy uproar,
The muddy torrent spins in eddies and swirls
Both banks uniting in joyous clamour
Awake, to join the festival of rain.*

The waters of Tagore's 'little river' that dances and gushes along its course like the very essence of life itself might indeed be the same waters that flows through literature to reach to reach Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* which swallows up humanity within its swelling labyrinth. Jerome K. Jerome fetches adventure out of the Thames in *Three Men in a Boat* while Eliot stands on its banks to realize it is but the carrier of the broken precipitates of the London Bridge, the waters in which he sees the reflection of a ruined civilization. From Twain's Mississippi in *Huckleberry Finn* to Ramanujan's Vaigai in *A River*, the paradox contained in

floating waters have drawn many to its mysteries. It is in contemplation of this simultaneous subtleness and cannibalistic nature of the river, the conflicting tranquil and torturous temperament it embodies, that Advaita Mallabarman stands like an orphan on the carcass of his native land to pen down *A River Called Titash*. Nostalgia and memory combines to form a passionate concoction as Mallabarman, one who witnessed the trials and tribulations of the Malo community residing on the banks of the Titash river in the Comilla district of north eastern Bangladesh, sings the swansong of his ancestors; much like J.M. Synge does in his documentary on the Irish fisher folk - *The Aran Islands*.

The Ganga Delta encompasses the whole of Lower Bengal and its riverine population, mainly during the early 1900's, were dependent on the water bodies that criss-cross this topography, not only for their livelihood as fishermen and farmers, but the very essence of the river is seen flowing among their traditions, cultures, practices, language and even their everyday responses. When Mallabarman writes- "All the paths from the yards of the Malo homes take them to the water of the Titash" (Bardhan 21); it seems quite apt to envisage not only Malo boats but also Malo minds and souls floating on the omniscient waters. Calling the Ganga Plain as the 'genus of life' (13); Radhakamal Mukherjee emphasizes on the kinship between man and his environment when he remarks- "Man here is essentially a child of the rivers." (20) The local dialects, Bengali proverbs and even the regional songs of the marginalized communities are interspersed with echoes of the river. In the Meghna inlet where boatmen meet to rest, a Murshida baul sings:

"In the immense waters at cosmic play is the pure.

Rocks float away and rafts capsize on dry shore!

Seeing rows of beings seated in water, clothed in water,

Even the merchant flees, leaves his boat on a sandbar." (Bardhan 62)

The river-centric environment not only appears in musical genres and regional sayings but also shows ample appearances in Bengali literature. Apart from Mallabarman, Manik Bandhopadhyay's *A Boatman Of Boatman*, Samaresh Basu's *Ganga*, Abu Ishaq's *River Padma's Silt Bed* and Amarendu Ghosh's *Kasem's Silt Bed* narrate the poverty stricken existence of the river bank dwellers, transforming their uncertain terrain into a hub of social life.

A River Called Titash is set in a typical fisherman community, a group of 'hundred and twenty' homes (Bardhan 270), on the banks of a minute tributary of the river Meghna. Conspicuous is its presence, and more conspicuous is the presence of the Malo's. However, though invisible to the world, the river and the Malo's share an overwhelming presence in each other's lives. Arising from the Meghna and returning back to it, Titash sees no rocky mountains with gushing waterfalls. It only sees fishermen and farmers toiling along its banks. The marginalized rurals are the only ones who inject identity into its tides. On the other hand, the river is that colossus which grandly stands over the fate of these villagers- their only giver, their only taker. The biblical dust from which man arise and perish is, to the Malo's, the waters of Titash. Mallabarman explains the god-like stature of the river when he writes- "They love it (the river) with their hearts, and that is why they string the name like a garland around their necks."(Bardhan 20).

Along the span of four sections of two parts each, Mallabarman traces the life of Kishore, a Malo fisherman, his wife Rajar Jhi, their son Ananta and Basanti, a Malo woman. Each of their stories is interlinked and takes the novel to its penultimate end and each of the stories is intermingled with Titash. Mallabarman has, in fact, documented his gasping native land through the travails of his four principle characters. But the character which achieves the most prominence in his narrative is the river itself. Fate, Chance and what Hardy calls 'Immanent Will' personifies itself in the form of Titash- deciding the fortunes of men with its rhythmic ebb and flow, carrying tragedy along with its tides. When the lives of the puny Malo families are tossed into utter chaos as the river silts up and changes its course, one could indeed imagine Titash as a tyrant God playing a game with his helpless puppets. One is then reminded of Shakespeare's words in *King Lear*:

*“As Flies to wanton Boys, are we to th’ Gods-
They kill us for their sport.”*

Kishore sets off in ‘The Journey Episode’ in search of greater catch and adventure to Ujaninagar along with his companions. The journey into unknown territories and the sight of a world beyond his village Gokanghat enlivens his senses as the waters carry him through an almost bildungsroman-like phase when his ‘abnormal hopes’ (Bardhan 55) are answered- having saved Rajar Jhi from a village brawl, Kishore is soon chosen as the groom for her. But the river soon takes away what it had gifted. Pirates attack Kishore’s boat on their return journey and steal his newly wed wife even before he could recognize her face. As the boat sails into Titash, ‘the wife of his heart’ is rumoured dead. The river that had held the promise of a new life now savagely turns murky with sinister darkness as the snatched wife turns Kishore senile.

In ‘New Home’, the same river brings Kishore’s wife and their son Ananta to Gokanghat where, in spite of poverty, pain and misery, they begin a life of their own. Kishore’s wife soon develops a friendship with Basanti as they share a sense of shared misfortune. United in their helplessness, the two bond over spinning flax, doting over Ananta and sharing stories. Titash, thus gives some short lived happiness to Rajar Jhi as she falls for the madman and tries to cure him with utmost devotion. In an almost cathartic moment, the madman recognizes his wife before his end. The four lives that had once set out after new hope are reduced to ash deposits at the bottom of the river that seems to echo Tennyson in *The Brook*:

*“For Men may come and Men may go,
But I go on forever.”*

The orphaned Ananta, shunned by the helplessness of his loving aunt, gathers new hope and freedom as he looks 'at the river to his heart's content...No barrier, no obstacle.' (Bardhan 160). Ananta's penchant for discovering the 'mysteries of the unknown', his quick wit and hunger for knowledge grows in leaps and bounds as Banamali and Udaitara take him under their guardianship. Titash thus guides the boy away from the life of despair at Gokanghat to one where he can dream of a better existence. The boat race on Titash ends with the final separation of Ananta from his aunt, a bitter blow that leaves Basanti bruised and battered physically and emotionally. The boatmen on Titash as if lament for her pain as she sobs over her shattered motherhood:

*"They all have their own ones, but I have none,
Thundering inside me are the waves of the ocean.*

*I came to the river's edge hoping to go across;
An empty boat with no boatman helplessly bobs."* (Bardhan 219)

Drained of every bit of remorse and sorrow, Basanti like Synge's Maurya, has no pain left within her anymore. The humiliation at the boat race had, as if, purged her and she appears as the champion of her village in protecting their culture and pride against the jatra group. But their subsequent defeat at a highly vocal song battle is simply the first of the many battles that the Malo's would lose as their famed unity breaks down, piece by piece. Fishermen discover 'something strange going on in Titash.' (Bardhan 243). As the river recedes, Malos realize they are nothing but 'floaters' whose home is the water, whose livelihood is the fish in it. Years progress only to expand the silt bed, brutally crushing the hopes of the little community, reduced to a dying fish gasping for breath and aching for life-giving water:

"Titash seems like an enemy: turned hostile and merciless. It has become a total stranger today. After holding them to its bosom with such affection all this time, it

suddenly pushes them away into some abyss of swirling black waters.”(Bardhan 245)

Every summer the Titash grows thinner and thinner, reduced to just a trickle of silver thread. Deserted by their deity, the Malo’s either leave Gokanghat or resort to begging. Few Malo’s survive the betrayal of Titash and Ananta, an educated man of the city, is one. In the end, he stands on the mound of the ‘shattered visage’ of his ‘antique land’ where-

*“Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch away.”*(336)

It is thus, quite apt that Mallabarman ends this semi-autobiographical novel by the silted banks of Titash, reverberating with ‘the sighing of those who fell and died’ (Bardhan 257) there.

Raymond Williams in *Ideas of Nature* emphasizes on the impossibility of the separation of Man and Nature. Extracting Nature out of the activities of men would render it bereft of its effective sense. So when Titash changes its course, it remains as nothing but a distant memory to the survivors along its banks. Its haloes status diminishes to only a ‘trace’ as its value disappears into oblivion. In this conflict between unequals, even though the river emerges victorious, it loses its essence. From an embodiment of the ‘eternal truth’ with ‘its bank . . . imprinted with stories . . . of genuine people of flesh and blood’ (Bardhan 22), the Malos now regard it as a ‘total stranger’ (Bardhan 245), a visitor, remembered only in moments of nostalgia. ‘The river; says Sravani Biswas, ‘change lives of the communities dependent on it, in the process the humans, too, change the river centric landscape’ (34). The river loses its omnipotent pride.

The avante garde filmmaker, Ritwik Ghatak, himself born in Comilla, made a film adaptation of the novel in 1973, dedicating it to ‘the myriad of toilers of everlasting Bengal’(Martin 1). In keeping with his desire to create ‘useful’ cinema and showing ample Brechtian influences, Ghatak has skillfully infused life into Mallabarman’s pages on celluloid with his ‘individual talent’. As characters struggle through the infernal cycle of Fate and Chance, the film tracks ‘the slow, painful deterioration of places, communities, personal relationships.’(Martin 1) Long shots of the river in various stages of voluptuousness and recession enables Ghatak to use it as a metaphor for the human lives and their desperate attempts at survival, over the numerous obstacles that threaten to absolve them. Ghatak has poignantly placed his whole film within two identical scenes of a dried river ravine in the beginning and at the end, probably signifying the completion of a voyage across a sea of memories, as a Bengali song hums in the background-

“The River Titash flows on but tomorrow it may be bone dry.

It may not even have the last drop without which our soul cannot depart.”

Mallabarman’s novel is humid with the evaporated essence of the Titash and vibrant with echoes of the cacophony that once voiced its silent shores, as one glances at the ‘naked shingles’ (483) crowding its stretch. It is like a ripple on the sea of wrinkled memories of a shattered community. Mallabarman, as the only educated member of his little village, gathers up the broken images that had constituted his childhood and pours the collection of his dying past into an epitaph for his people. In doing so, he presents a montage of human perseverance, companionship and the struggle to keep living, to keep hoping in the face of repeated adversity.

‘Poetry is written with tears, fiction with blood and history with invisible ink’(156) writes Carlos Ruiz Zafon. *A River Called Titash* merges poetry, fiction as well as history within its pages, as Mallabarman’s ink render visibility to the blood and tears of the of the forgotten, anonymous people in Bengal’s turbulent history, as they regularly battle forces beyond human

perception and control. The readers, along with the helpless characters, realize, as if in a moment of epiphany, the truth in Omar Khayyam's words in *The Rubaiyat* –

*“We are no other than a moving Row
Of magic Shadow- Shapes that come and go
Round the Sun-illumin'd Lantern held
In Midnight, by the Master of the Show

But Helpless pieces of the game He plays
Upon this Check-board of night and days
Hither and thither moves and checks and plays
And one by one back in the Closet lays.”(15)*

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