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**THE CONFLICT BETWEEN TRADITION AND MODERNITY
IN SUDHIN GHOSE'S - 'CRADLE OF THE CLOUDS'**

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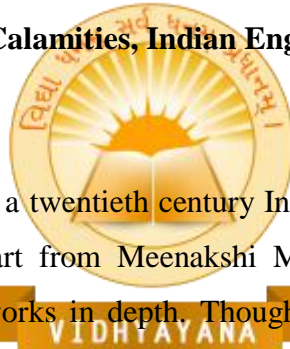
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ABSTARCT

The issues related to epidemic and natural calamities are the frequent themes in Indian English literature. India had suffered from many such calamities in the past and also suffering from Covid-19, an epidemic recently. Sudhin Ghose in his novel, *Cradle of the Clouds*, portrays the suffering of people during famine and their efforts to overcome the situation. The novel presents the conflict between traditional and modern views while looking for the possibilities of human survival. Due to the development of science, people believe more in facts and reasons which are scientifically proven rather than having faith in traditional ideas of religion and humanities. Thus, the current paper is an attempt to understand how such calamities have been managed previously and the role played by science and religion.

Key Words: Epidemic, Natural Calamities, Indian English Fiction, Science, Religion



Ghose is a rare instance of a twentieth century Indian English novelist who has been almost completely forgotten. Apart from Meenakshi Mukherjee and Shyamala Narayana hardly anyone has analysed his works in depth. Though his fictional world displays some features of the novels of the 1930s and 1940s, it is also strikingly peculiar. His major literary achievement is his tetralogy of novels- *And Gazelles Leaping* (1949), *Cradle of the Clouds* (1951), *The Vermillion Boat* (1953), and *The Flame of the Forest* (1955) that deal with the childhood, adolescence and youth of his central character who is the first person narrator of this tetralogy. The nameless protagonist of this novel (called 'Balaram' at places, because he was born on the anniversary of the birth of the legendary Balarama of the plough) is from the Penhari Parganas, lost both his parents early.

Cradle of the Clouds presents the child growing up in an Indian village. It is the best organized of Ghose's novels in terms of structure. Ghose waves the stories within the stories in the box tradition of medieval India. All the episodes in the novel are linked up with the Ploughing ceremony the village women perform to bring down rain to end the drought. Ghose's village is not the usual Indian village, with its covetous money-lender, corrupt



Brahmin priest etc. The beauty of the land of the Red Valley and Blue Hills is well evoked; the warm heartedness of the Santals who live in the nearby villages and forests is well brought out. Events are presented through the eyes of the boy, e.g., drought means not food grains becoming scares but the narrator's favourite hibiscus plant drying up and withering.

Throughout the novel, one observes the conflict between science and religion represented by different groups of people. Ghose, also, represents various superstitions prevailing in the village. In this novel, the mind of a school boy with its innocent immaturity becomes the focal area to analyse the thought process as they impinge on it. He does not know his real 'duty' (*svadharma*) so he is confronted with opposing views on duty. The villagers' simple and yet devout faith influence the boy strongly. Eventually, he takes the traditional faith on trust as when he participates as Balarama in the ritualistic ploughing ceremony organized during a severe drought.

The ploughing ceremony, a religious ritual for bringing the rains, is the focal point of this novel towards which all incidents and episodes move. The myth behind the ploughing ceremony or *halakarshan* is explained in some detail. The protagonist takes his traditional faith on trust as when he participates as Balarama in the ritualistic ploughing ceremony organized during a severe drought. The women folk sacrifice their modesty and participate in the ceremony to end the drought. Ghose depicts the customs and traditions prevalent in the rural areas.

The protagonist was the only one in the village who was born on the same day as mythical Balarama, the elder brother of Krishna and hence the elders declared "You and the Second Master will have to help us. Otherwise we shall perish. We need you for the Ploughing Ceremony." (75) It is due to the role the narrator plays in the ceremony that he is called Balaram by the villagers. The villagers believe that Krishna himself is personified in the Second Master of the village school, Hem Chandra Nahar, who like Krishna, is the eighth child of his parents and is born on *Janmashmti* day so he is chosen to play the role of Krishna in the ploughing ceremony. The impending *halakarshan* ritual towards which all actions and movements proceed in the novel is seen at various levels of meaning. The village people have a firm belief in the efficacy of the ritual to bring rains, but the Second Master, who is to enact



Krishna, mocks at their irrational superstition. Balaram, the protagonist, does not mock, and yet he cannot share the enthusiasm of the villagers for this sympathetic ritual. Balaram takes his doubts to Punditji, the wise man of the village, and asks: “But will they get any (rain) by simply repeating a ceremony performed aeons ago?” “Ofcourse they will.” He [Punditji] spoke as though he was making a matter-of-fact statement... “Whatever you ask,” he affirmed “you will get. Provided you know how to ask for a blessing. That’s why it is important to master the art of thinking correctly.” (90) Thus, The Punditji assures the protagonist that the ritual will succeed if he has a faith and the protagonist has no way out and has to accept it. Mashi-ma makes Balaram ready for the ceremony. He was put on a “short dhotie of red cheli, vermillion silk” (242). And he was handed over to Anjaliar-ma who was in charge of the ceremony. The very customs of the ceremony look very strange to Balaram yet he participates for his own people. He sees that “the place was cluttered up with a large number of water jars and pitchers filled to the brim” (249-50). At this point, recalling what happened just few hours ago, he sighs with heavy heart.

Just before the Ploughing Ceremony, in the neighbouring village at Mahisha-ban the fire was blown out in their houses and they pleaded for the succour. They wanted some water to put out the fire. But the villagers clearly denied providing them water by giving them various reasons. Showing this action of the villagers, the “tears of anger” (238) came into Balarm’s eyes. This is very much unbearable for the narrator and he, himself, feels guilty because he cannot do anything in this matter as he says: “It was my fault, I felt, that they had had to go away without any water.” (238-39) Later on he comes to know the truth when Punditji said: “The villagers should have spread themselves the sin of a holocaust. They ought not to have imitated Kansa who put fire to Brinda-ban. The Ploughing Ceremony by itself would have been more than enough.” (239) Just as Kansa set fire to Brindaban, the villagers set fire to the neighbouring village, hoping that the holocaust will make the enactment of the ritual complete. And Balaram was just surprised when he saw the very women of Mahisha-ban, too, brought with them “pitchers filled to the brim with sparkling water!” (253) They were worried only for the while and now they were laughing and joking. The narrator plights: “It is the Golah which eventually received his wrath. The very ground leading out of the Golah has been blasted. They spoke as though the loss of the ancient

landmark meant nothing to them. I could not contain myself and asked Anjaliar-ma why the Santal women could not utilize the water they brought with them to put out the fire?" (253)

Anjaliar-ma answered him that, "the lustral water destined for Balaram must not be used for any other purpose." (253) There were many such customs and this was out of Balaram's logic. He was the only boy in the crowd as it was the custom that only women can take part in Ploughing Ceremony. The men of the village were not allowed to come out of their homes for that night. He doubts on his existence and the very purpose of his being there:

What was going to happen to me? What did the women want of me?
Why were they all dressed in their fineries as though they were going to attend a wedding festivity? Who was I? Why was I there? Was I dreaming? Some of the women were undressing as though I did not exist. Were they getting ready for a bath with all their jewellery and floral garlands? What made all the women so bold and brazen as to ignore my presence? They treated me as though I were an infant. (256)

Balaram brought down rain and fooled Kansa by ploughing the fields with his toy plough, and the ritual consists of the women of the village, naked, going in the dark to plough the dry earth with the help of a boy chosen to play Balaram. Some women were joking on him for "not being a boy but merely a girl pretending to be one." (256) He hated this addressing him as a 'girl' and was feeling ashamed of himself. He did not cry ever in the presence of others whenever he felt severe physical pain but, at this moment he could not prevent his tears and "he was weeping like a helpless baby" (258). Suddenly, he starts enjoying the company of Anjaliar-ma and felt like "a suckling babe in mother's arms" (259). It gave him a motherly warm. Further he declares boldly: "I felt transformed into a different being- no longer terribly shy nor ashamed of my masculinity." (259) Now, she was no more a stranger to him. He could not understand the reason of his crying just before a while. May be, he cried because first time he felt motherly warm in the lap of Anjaliar-ma:

No one had ever kissed me on the lips before nor fondled my limbs with such loving tenderness. No one had before then offered me her bosom to repose on nor breathed in my ears such words of endearment as Anjaliar-

ma. 'The ecstasy of intense joy,' according to the Punditji, 'is manifested in the same way as the ecstasy of intense sorrow. They are the obverse and the reverse of the same coin.' May be, I cried because I experienced excessive happiness. (260)

Now, he was no longer ashamed though he wore nothing. He participates with 'faith' as he says: "I was different from the rest: the only boy in the midst of women. I did not consider myself a boy any more: I felt I was a man: I was their protector: my strong arm would defend them from all prying intruders. I felt proud to be distinct from the others in the courtyard." (261) Anjaliar-ma carried him on her back and she started the procession. They also shout with joy saying: " 'Jai! Balaram! Jai! Hail! Balaram! Hail!' " (250) Everyone made him request to bring down the rain otherwise they will be forced to leave the Penhari Parganas which they never wished as they say: "we love this land. We don't want to leave it." (266) He did not understand why they repeated frequently the same question. It was not in his hand otherwise he might not have waited. He explains:

Had it been in my power to work a miracle should I have waited for so long? Did I not shed tears in secret when I saw the village cattle led away to unknown grazing fields far from the Red Valley? Did I not sob in silence at night time when the drought slowly dried up my Hibiscus bushes? Was it not my desire to see the Red Valley flourish that made me move in the circle of the Second Master? Was it not the same passion which made me contemplate working with Dynamiter, a man whom I did not like? Was I not the boy who prayed nightly in the *moucharaby*? 'Lord! Take me if you will, but let not the Penhari Parganas be drowned or scorched!' Was not the sorrow of my people my sorrow? Was I a stranger in their midst? Was I not a child of the red soil as much as they? Was I not tortured as any of them at the thought that the prolonged drought might ruin the villagers? (267-68)

The villagers call him 'our Balaram' who lead them out of the crisis and assure their continuity as a community. But the moment in which the protagonist becomes most closely

integrated within the village community is also a moment of acute embarrassment for him. He feels he has been “robbed of [his] birth name” (250) and is troubled that no one “bothered to ask [him] what [he] thought of this method of despoiling a human being of his own appellation.” (Ibid.) Throughout the novel, he feels the sense of alienation. The protagonist’s isolated individual identity is compromised when the villagers claim him as ‘our Balaram’. However, the tension between the alienated protagonist and the community is left unresolved in the novel. The story of the protagonist’s integration within the village community is told in a flashback and is thus made to coincide with the moment in which he moves out of the pre-modern world of traditional storytelling and the close-knit village community to pursue higher studies in Calcutta.

The novelist portrays the details connected with the ceremony with great fidelity. Due to the long drought the earth was so hard, even though they poured good amount of water it was difficult to make a scratch. The women were bleeding and the sight was gruesome. As Balaram feels disappointed and blames himself for not “being strong enough to make furrows on the field.” (277) As the night advanced, his heart beats increased. He was informed by the villagers that not one of the participants in the Ploughing Ceremony could return home so he became more worried.

Evil also appears here in the form of intolerant and sceptical rationalism, represented by the Second Master who vainly tries to interrupt the ritual. In spite of his criticism of superstition, Chahar turns up for the ceremony because he knows that according to the ritual, the women cannot go back home unless it rains. He has no faith in the ceremony, and plans to sell the prettier girls to brothels. He turns up drunk and starts insulting the women. When he accepted the proposal to act the role of Krishna, he was already informed that his task was to play on the flute from the distance while he joins the people who are ploughing the field and abuses women. He shouted at Balaram that “he was no longer prepared to play the role of an underling!” (278). But the miracle happened. A pair of night birds passed and their wing flapped the Second Master’s face which suddenly changed his behaviour. And he started musing flute and during this time Balaram succeed “in making a few scratches on the ground.” (281) Though his decent behaviour did not long last. He again turned the same



disturbing the ceremony and declared that “It won’t rain” (281). He says to Anjaliar-ma who tried to protest:

‘You don’t like my language! But I like your thighs. Well, I’ll give you the first preference. You have not a stitch of clothing on your back. And you are asking me to behave decently.’...Don’t run away, my Beauty! Unless you want to show me your behind now that I know your front. Don’t run away from the magic touch of Krishna’s flute. It has beautiful names. (282)

This was very shocking for Balaram. He chastises him with Mahendra Chandal, the brass-bound staff that Punditji has lent him for the night. In the narrator’s own life, Krishna instead of playing on the flute tries to take advantage of the women, as Kansa did. It is clear that the narrator’s chastisement of the Second Master has symbolic overtones. And the unknown girl who hands him the staff in the darkness is identified as Myna in *The Flame of the Forest*; it is she who finally helps the young man to fight evil with the weapons of traditional faith.

Finally, the rain comes and “the agate-hard ground was changed into sweet-smelling soil” (285). It was indeed a night of miracles. “Such ceremonies were part of the tribal and primitive communities. One need not categorise these as fictive fantasies.” (Abraham104) Anjaliar-ma carried him home and when she said, “Leave the child alone!” (289) so he can take rest. Hearing this, Balaram asked somewhat hurt: “Am I no longer your Balaram?” (289). And she assured him about it.

Thus, there is on the one hand the blind faith of the village people who believe in the literal truth of the ritual, and on the other hand the impatient irreverence of the Second Master. In between there is the attitude of the Punditji, whose belief is not in the ritual itself, but in the faith of the people performing it. Balaram wavers among these views, but finally at the moment of crisis the collective faith of the people pulls him through, and without knowing how, he brings about the miracle.



The impending *halakarshan* ritual towards which all actions and movements proceed in the novel is seen at various levels of meaning. The village people have a firm belief in the efficacy of the ritual to bring rains, but the Second Master, who is to enact Krishna, mocks at their irrational superstition. Balaram, the protagonist, does not mock, and yet he cannot share the enthusiasm of the villagers for this sympathetic ritual. Balaram takes his doubts to Punditji, the wise man of the village, and asks: “But will they get any (rain) by simply repeating a ceremony performed aeons ago?” “Of course they will.” He [Punditji] spoke as though he was making a matter-of-fact statement... “Whatever you ask,” he affirmed “you will get. Provided you know how to ask for a blessing. That’s why it is important to master the art of thinking correctly.” (90) The ceremony proves to be efficacious and the faith of the narrator is reinforced. And he declares: “He who has faith need not be afraid of anything, not even of Satan. Our trials prove our faith...Remember, truth is discovered in sorrow and in exile, and there is no easy way to wisdom.” (303) Comprehension and appreciation of the tradition is a part of what Punditji calls “wisdom” which “alone can save the individual man” (304). And it only comes through the process of self-exploration because: “Wisdom is to be sought for and acquired through one’s own efforts. Even if I told you all that I know you would not be any wiser. You will have to seek wisdom for yourself.”(304) The seat of wisdom is the Cradle of the Clouds as a geographical region and his “juvenile quest for a glimpse” (132) of the place was not successful. Hence the novel ends with the protagonist’s desire to undertake his journey “to the seat of Sapience, the Cradle of the Clouds” (304), which now presumably is a journey into the interior.

Thus, it is observed that, *Cradle of the Clouds* is a record of Balaram’s psycho-spiritual development during his adolescence phase. The details regarding the physical growth are consciously played down drawing a sharper focus on the emotional and spiritual aspects. It is also remarkable that Balaram’s life during the school days is fashioned by a variety of influences. Like Stephen Dedalus of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Balaram, being a boy is always on the receiving end.



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