



Intricacies of the Feudal Social Hierarchy in the Short Stories of Mamang Dai's "The Road" and Devanur Mahadeva's "Tar Arrives"

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Abstract

The quote, 'Old is dying and the new cannot be born' is very appropriate to the two short stories Mamang Dai's "The Road" and Devanur Mahadeva's "Tar Arrives" selected for discussion in this paper. The stories detail the landscapes and people of a remote village set in North India and in South India. Weighing more on the contemporary issues of social, economic and cultural progressions- opposing the influences of a new culture, act of resistance to retain its cultural Identity-the paper extricates the paradox involved. Modernity does not deal with elemental issues of a village or the complex ongoing in the minds of the people of the village (the changes they witness in the global world) that confront the present generation which toss their lives and customs into trepidation. "Tar Arrives" is an observation on the struggle within religious and secular values between the Patel and the four young men Lakuma, Rajappa, Madu and Shambu. "The Road" reveals the social stigma (the road brings thieves, outsiders, disease) towards change which is brought out through Larik who articulates apprehensions of modernity that comes with road, telephone connections, electricity etc. Both the stories expose the facts detailing around the progression with tarring/ the Road acting as a metaphor and measured out against a disaster -accidental death of a child in "Tar Arrives", landslide in "The Road".

Keywords: Modernity, Feudal hierarchy, Belief, Mamang Dai, Devanur Mahadeva.

The short stories "Tar Arrives" and "The Road" uses the tarring the road as a metaphor of Modernism, that is adapting to the changes of the times, where change is obligatory and is the law of time and nature. The people of the two stories believe in the dynamics of society. Nevertheless, how they perceive the changes around them and the way they blend/assimilate with it; not only create groups but also create problems. Subsequently, it questions the long standing feudal social hierarchy which acted as the pillar at different times in the Indian history (Tar Arrives).

The innumerable effects of modern fluctuations on people and society that make them vulnerable like: the robbery in the village in "The Road" was considered a taboo by the village people. Luda convinces the villages to press for an inquiry to catch the culprits. Duan had taken personal interest to solve it. Later in the story, when Larik destroys the road, causing landslide that smash chunks of the road, further heavy storm shook the fringed thatch of the longhouses of the village-which depict the hard life the village had to live with, Luda is



seen dancing in the rain because he had witnessed such various incidents in his life. He says, “Hadn’t it survived for so long?” “Wouldn’t it survive these winds of change as well?”

In “Tar Arrives” Patel is not very happy with the four boys- who have revolutionary ideas after studying from nearby town. They are the first ones to raise voice against any discrimination in the village. They write to the editor of a newspaper about the Patel’s plan to misuse the money, which upset Patel in turn affecting the village. After the story of the dirty young women going to the police station after being humiliated by the villagers shared by the Hosur passer-by made rounds in the village. Patel instead of humiliating the four boys at the chavadi, front of the villagers, goes straight to the police station to complain about the misplaced tar (outside the village, around a pit with mouths wide open). Adding to that was the missing child of Rangappa, his body completely smeared with tar was lying in the pit. “Plot grew darker and darker and as the village waited for night to fall, there was yet another thing that would come to pass” (Tar Arrives).

Luda and Patel represent the earlier generation who have witnessed changes and how the feudal system adapted to them (changes). The village Gowda and Patel (Tar Arrives) Isaam and Luda (The Road) think they understand the society better than the younger generation, hold on to it- with their advices and control, calling for meeting (chavadi or kebang) giving their decisions. The importance of such meeting and the respect it held can be understood in the following words:

Kebang was the shining institution of these villages that solved all disputes and dispensed justice. Under the shade of the trees a group of men would assemble... recognised for their knowledge and honesty, their courage and their powers of oratory. Sometimes a case could drag on for years and even carry over into the next generation. Yet there was always a council of men to take over and assemble again under the trees to distil words, explore human psychology, and weigh and measure right against wrong in a long exercise of logic and compassion. (Luda)

With education, new policies by the government, people of the village visiting other places for education, jobs... along with the modern means of communication (media) people are exposed to the global world -creating a complex society difficult to comprehend by one system and wait for solution through chavadi and kebang. By the time the older generation comprehended this and acted on it, the younger generation were quick to understand and act on those issues. They are much more open to changes and impressionable, for the progress of the village.

When Patel decides to use the remaining money of the government contract for making a tar road, to renovate the village temple, the youngsters (whom the Patel disapprove off) question Patel’s ethics challenging the existing hierarchy, that believed in oratory skill- they could control people’s thoughts by the use of the right words. However, to the on lookers it seems a conflict between religious and secular values, nevertheless modern complex challenges of socialistic values - that positions new demanding problems -culture specific- are brushed aside. Issam had sleepless nights worrying about somebody intruding their sacred places, it turns out right, when the granary doors were wrecked. Accusing the



road for the source for the happening in the village. Duan, the youngest elected state assembly member representing the government of the village (becomes an outsider too), though he assures them to restore the village jewels, he was looked at apprehensively. Luda acknowledges Duan and convinces him of his and the village support. He also warns/instructs Larik and the youngsters to join hand with Duan. But Larik has his reservations, he does not want to be mesmerised by Duan's words- promising his people that he would move "heaven and earth to get to the bottom of it, but no one must take the law into their own hands".

This 'new culture' representing Duan and the four youngsters, who represent the larger system (government/laws) in the short stories expose a new space in which people find themselves speechless to function in the absence of cultural stabilizers. The stories open describing the landscape- the roads are narrow difficult to trudge: hedged in on both sides by cacti, meanders around the banyan grove in which the spirits reside, forks into three and then runs the village where the houses stand so close that seem to choke each other. (Tar Arrives) "This is the last village on the administrative map. Anyone looking at the hills from the highest point in it would see the river coiled like a shimmering snake in the still, green jungle, beyond which rose a forbidding knot of mountains. It was a landscape out of dream... (The Road).

This description of the villages show that people of these villages had its own rhythm for centuries. They were trying to stick on to the old certainties and beliefs at different times, during the course of their history in that place, until the road was proposed. Now things were beyond one's prediction. In Mamang Dai's "The Road" the road was being built for a year now.

It ran up the mountain like a broken ladder of crumbling earth stained with iron ore. The red gash turned in great loops and bends and plunged into the heart of the far mountains, trying to reach the scattered villages buried deep in the land of mist and wild chestnut.

Exposing the village as well as the people of the village to the people coming from far of places to make the road, which gave room for exchange of ideas and life- bringing in new challenges. New faces from far away came to work, these labourers settled amidst the dense plumes reassuring themselves; bamboo tube was fixed to draw water which was better than any taps in the towns, boulders served as laundry stones, women bathed while the passing men stared at the wet clothes that hugged their bodies. These exploitations of nature and situation made the local men of the village fume in anger and plunged them to take decisions which could not be comprehended. Seeing these changes around them, it was apparent for the village people not to heed to Duan's promise to restore the village to its old sanctity.

In Devanur Mahadeva's "Tar Arrives" the road has been sanctioned and the Patel is given the contract. Even before the road begins the village celebrates that they would be getting work for many months and need not worry, also the promise that the remaining money will be used to renovate the temple. This shows that the Patel is clever in calculating the means to save money to strengthen his position and the belief of the village, through his oratory and tactful skills. But his skills (authority) could not convince the four youngsters



who had completed high school from the neighbouring cities, having more exposure of different ways of approaching a situation against the age-old system (tactful in manipulating to times and situation).

These two incidents can be referred to what Luda says, honesty and goodness were of no use in the world Duan (The Road) or the four youngsters (Tar Arrives) had entered. “To get things done a person had to use stealth and patience, like setting a trap. ‘you have to lure us like fish, like deer. You have to use words sweet like oiled wood.’” (The Road) It is only Duan (the youngest elected member to the state assembly) in the story “The Road”, who speaks progressively and Mayum his girlfriend trusts him. He is sincere and wants to see his village and people progress. He takes effort to push through the process for the road to be complete; for the vehicles can ply on them, to bring telephone line, electricity and new schools-for children to learn “in the new brightness that would pierce their dim homes like a sharp ray of light” (The Road). The drawbacks of this thought process (dream of Duan) on people and village (the real world) towards progress was not comprehend by Duan which is mentioned by Larik “He has no idea about the situation” (The Road). The people of the village were in distress, until this day they had not witnessed any robbery but now, the granary doors ransacked all their precious bead and jewels stolen. They were dumbstruck and beyond consolation. The group with Larik (decided) takes it on them to protect the place themselves. They feel exposed with the coming of the road, than to believe in progress through the tarring of the road. They target to destroy the road and are successful in their action. Larik and his small group who engage in this action, thinking that they were doing this for the good of the village, fulfilling the dream of the earlier generation (keeping the village/nature safe from intruders). This former generation, who were fading away, wasting because the earlier war and valour had nothing to do with people surrendering their ancestral lands to the government.

The famous Buddhist proverb says “In each loss there is a gain, as in every gain there is a loss, and with each ending comes a new beginning.” During that process is required patience but do the present generation comprehend the circumstances well or is it possible at all to comprehend, so that they can wait in patience.

Larik expresses his fear that the government cannot do anything on its own, the road that was coming up now- after fifty years of their struggle in that village- was bringing in outsiders, thieves, disease. He also wonders why in the present state the village cannot be improved. “Wait, they say all the time. Everything takes time, they say” (The Road). He also compares the city he had visited that the roads in the capital were worse than the one being built there, nothing much is done there (in cities) and he wonders how the authorities (Duan) promise the village better facilities. Larik is concerned that the authorities have no knowledge about the people of this far away village (last in the administrate map), as to how they live and who they are. He dreaded that the road and the things that came with it strangled them and threatened to steal “their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields”.

This statement was true to nature- the landscape as well- nature is destroyed in the name of progress: The dense mat of banyan trees was razed to the ground- machines, stone



wheels belching smoke run around these places now- this destruction is a fascinating site for the people of the villages, who are still the same people, “what they were” but have changed beyond recognition (tar smeared all over them) (Tar Arrives). The hills echoed the sound of heavy trucks bumping, screeching up the hillside carrying iron and cement. They scraped the riverbed for sand, blew up rocks that hung over the cut earth, menacing to smash the bulldozers and workmen who blew whistles and ran like ants on the edge of the mountain. (The Road)

And when this progress “The Road” was force stopped by few miscreants; the nature and people were affected again. Tar drums were drawn outside the village its mouth open, the tar drained into a pit, Rangappa’s kid was stuck in the tar, struggled to survive (Tar Arrives). After Larik had doused the road with a small plastic hose, overhang of road moved and cracked, as the earth that trust up the roots of the old tree fell down the mountain and hit the road, “Larik thought, ‘The old tree is weeping’”

The few benefits of tarring the road- tar is used for plugging leaking pots, children play amidst the tar and machines, sticky tar shut crying children as they put the tar smeared hands to their mouth to wipe out. The elders also wonder at the miracle of road making, the process and the things (various machines) used. (Tar Arrives)

The village in Mamang Dai’s “The Road” worries about the safety of their houses. Throughout that, they witness the stories of faraway places “young boys were robbing the supermarkets in town and teenagers were extorting money and riding away on stolen motorcycles. In the plains, migrant workers prowled at night planning burglaries and murder”. The contract of various work- tarring, electricity, telephone connection... were not given to the people of the village, nor these people are taken for those work (work is undertaken in their village). These incidents and more make them realise that there are no spirits, these spirits have no role to play in most of the condition that people had experienced/endured in the village.

In both the stories tarring the road opens up the pandoras box (a present which seems valuable but which in reality is a curse), the short coming of their own people. This also evidences that it is not one (few) person, his thoughts that can bring in progress to a village, but it requires a collective effort.

‘How do you know he will?’ Issam had shouted quite loudly. He had promised us water and nothing has been done. The labourers are drinking it all up!... Duan is our own boy, but after all, he can’t do everything!’- for the first time in the village voices had been raised in dissent. The elders and young men had begun to argue”.

In both the stories people of the village worry about their image from an onlooker/outside. They dream to be a model village, prove their potential, individually as well as a village. After the letter to the editor is read out in the village in “Tar Arrives”, Patel calls for a meeting, when nothing favourable turns out in the meeting and after the news of the dirty women brought in from a neighbouring man coming from Hosur- rounding off the landlords, Patel goes straight to the police station and surrenders his position of authority - when the tar went missing drawn outside the village-destroyed, (Tar Arrives). In “The Road”



Duan says Luda about the opinion of his village people in the town that they are most intractable, don't help themselves, only know to protest. Many others (from different villages) like Duan working sincerely according to the times, trying to bridge the old ways of living to the new life styles (with the changing times) were disappointed after this turn of events – road being destroyed, electric poles missing, personally hurt for their earnest efforts, afraid that even after doing so much their integrity would be questioned. They had no choice but to shield themselves from their villages, stop visiting their village as they were busy on different project in other villages, cold towards their people when they visit them for favours.

The bridge breaking is metaphorical, once the same bridge helped people connect to the towns and find new ways/hopes of living (The Road). Now the breaking of the bridge represents the present generation does not have such a treat/ a ray hope too. They continue to rot in their old outdated system. The only possibility is not only to fix the bridge connecting villages but to fix the gap between the minds of people towards improvement. In “Tar Arrives” the writer uses lot of words that conveys gloomy prognosis of the story the way it ends- “the dim light from within the house fell out of the windows and was lost in the darkness”. “The Patel clenched his fist and stood up like a shot- hit the lantern, broke the glass ...the lantern flickered until it finally died out, plunging the whole place into darkness. Pandemonium ensued”. “...after they had watched and watched, and the blackness of it filled their eyes, they would slowly move away. Nobody had a word to say”. “Plot grew darker and darker and as the village waited for night to fall, there was yet another thing that would come to pass”.

The only mistake that the village had approved by their people till then was troubling young men or young girls (teasing them). “Everyone is waiting for those boys to be caught harassing some girl” “It was her practice to seduce all the teenaged boys of the village”. The punishment to that mistake was to flog them to their underpants, as was executed to the dirty women of the neighbouring village. But the new enlightenment of the four men because of their exposure was beyond the village people's imagination.

In “The Road” the colour red/ heart, different colours to express their emotion as with nature, few destructions to nature- they were guilty of it, is expressed and people laughing to brush off their plight is repeated. Colour red to indicate feeling of inauspicious at some places- “the red gash turned in great loops and bends and plunged into the heart of the far mountains, trying to reach the scattered villages buried deep in the land of mist and wild chestnut”, “mad woman made red by the gouged-out earth threw bits of shale and rock at travellers”, “Everybody believed in the story of the red pool, the colour of the blood, where ghostly fish swam round and round wearing bells that tinkled and drove strong men to acts of murderous violence. In the summer rains the road was crushed under falling rocks and boulders. The villagers clambered over them and laughed loudly, wading through the sticky red mud”, “new brightness that would pierce their dim homes like a sharp ray of light”, “the village seemed to stop breathing. The clear air shimmered and the long houses shone like crouched monoliths with their fringe of wild plantain neatly trimmed over the narrow doorways”, “from her dark door Issam jangled”,



The mention of different shades is brought out to express different feelings and union with nature: “They followed the green and silver vein of the river”, “Yellow light glinting in their eyes”, “Orange trees grew here, the bamboo was young and rain-washed” “families who arrived moved in a daze of wonderment- memorizing the green stillness”, “river coiled like a shimmering snake in the still, green jungle, beyond which rose a forbidding knot of mountains”, “across the river the white sand banks stretched and narrowed, before they were swallowed by the darkness where spiked bamboo stood in silent columns”, “walked through the forests carrying bamboo flares”, “They cut plantain stems and lashed them together into rafts to get across”. “Thunderstruck victims”, “Now stop sowing poison!” “It was a landscape out of dream, and though an onlooker might pause and get his bearing, sooner or later the impenetrable vastness would trouble his thoughts”, “tallest hills and the most secret mountains began. The villages remained mysterious and remote. They were beyond time. Till the road came”.

“They would exchange words and looks that kept them laughing and happy all through the long summers”, “if there was laughter and singing, like this...”, “then he stopped and laughed when he saw Luda prancing around stiff-legged before him”. Luda’s dream also has significance: walking in an unknown land, full of rocks ...saw big red flowers blooming on the rocks. He concludes his dream saying that: “we will grow old drinking drinks and die in a state of happiness. Hah, ha, ha!”

The story “The Road” also informs (a caution) in a song, that the young men are not wedded, the young beauties run away from them as they see thorns on their hand -indicates the youngsters are engaged in wrong adulterous activities. The feudal social hierarchy, which was previously a required and the only way of living, is broken to pieces; the village which was content with its simple way of living gets shattered with the introduction of the road and other things that come with it. Changing the face of the village, assorting their beliefs, habits, value system, human relationships, customs, and practices of people. This leads to extremities which need immediate reconfiguration in the cultural co-ordinates of the village as the feudal social hierarchy- its basis is quizzed.

The short stories reveal that any approach towards change is bipolar in its nature. It pinpoints the innate contradictory factor whether to resist /oppose change or to embrace change, making people’s life difficult to make the right choice, because they have to live with the choice they make as the consequences of their action cannot be altered. The act of resistance to the swamping influences of new culture, aids in preserving long standing native/local identity, which is required to an individual to feel a sense of belonging to the place he lives in (belongs). The village elders representing the Patel and others in the “Tar Arrives”, Larik and Issam and the disillusioned village people in “The Road”. The changing times do not support such resistance.

On the other hand, trying to embrace/opposing new hopes and progressive action seems rebellious or a desperate affair which is clearly evident in the four young men -the extremities is brought out in the stories. The characters in both the short stories after the consequences of their action are caught up in this dilemma- the dilemma creating pensive



Hamletian mood, powerless to make their choice. The quote, “Old is dying and the new cannot be born” seem appropriate to the two short stories Mamang Dai’s “The Road” and Devanur Mahadeva’s “Tar Arrives” selected for discussion in this paper. Weighing more on the contemporary issues of social, economic and cultural progressions- opposing the influences of a new culture, act of resistance to retain its cultural Identity-the paper extricates the paradox involved. It is made very profound in this study, that modernity does not deal with the elemental issues of a village or the complex ongoing in the minds of the people of the village (the changes they witness in the global world) that confront the present generation, tossing their lives and customs into trepidation.

“Tar Arrives” reflects not only the struggle within religious and secular values, but also the complex changes through the modern influences and education between the Patel/the people of the village and the four young men Lakuma, Rajappa, Madu and Shambu. “The Road” reveals the social stigma (the road brings thieves, outsiders, disease) towards change which is brought out through Larik, who articulate apprehensions of modernity that comes with road, telephone connections, electricity ... he tries to save his village from external influences, not realizing that by stopping such influences stops their growth as well.

Both the stories expose the facts detailing around the progression with tarring/ the Road acting as a metaphor and measured out against a disaster -accidental death of a child in “Tar Arrives”, landslide, disconnecting all means of connections with the outsiders in “The Road”.

Chinua Achebe’s statement, life just has to go on, and if you refuse to accept changes, then tragic though it may be, you are swept aside, seem very accurate to the two stories discussed here.

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