

Tradition in Transition: The Emerging Agency of Tribal Youth in Indian Fiction

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 12

Special Issue: 3

Month: April

Year: 2025

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

Citation:

Kiruba, T., and P. Aparna. "Tradition in Transition: The Emerging Agency of Tribal Youth in Indian Fiction." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Sciecne and Humanities*, vol. 12, no. S3, 2025, pp. 105–08.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v12iS3-Apr.9066>

T. Kiruba

Research Scholar

Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore

P. Aparna

Research Scholar

Karpagam Academy of Higher Education, Coimbatore

Introduction

The voices of marginalized people, especially tribal and indigenous groups, have been increasingly represented in contemporary Indian literature. These stories are crucial for recovering histories that have been suppressed as well as for capturing the vibrant identities of these groups in the face of sociocultural change and modernity. In these tales, young people particularly tribal youth have become important characters who represent the conflicts between tradition and change. This essay looks at how indigenous kids are portrayed as agents of cultural negotiation and preservation in Nilima Sinha's *Red Blooms in the Forest*, Mahasweta Devi's *The Why-Why Girl*, and Zai Whitaker's *Andamans Boy*. The younger generation's crucial role in forming the identities and futures of their communities is shown by these works, which provide complex depictions of how they balance the competing demands of contemporary education, cultural continuity, and outside interference.

Questioning Authority and Seeking Knowledge in *The Why-Why Girl*

In a culture that marginalizes tribal people, Moyna, the child heroine of Mahasweta Devi's *The Why-Why Girl*, becomes a potent symbol of resistance and the need for knowledge. As a member of the Shabar tribe, which has long been stigmatized as a "criminal tribe," Moyna is in a severely disadvantaged social position. She is able to examine the world around her, though, because of her unwavering curiosity. The narrator remarks, "She never stops asking questions." "Why? Why? I want to sweep your courtyard, but why? Why am I unable to attend school? These ostensibly straightforward questions go to the core of structural inequity (Devi 14). Moyna's ambition to comprehend and alter her reality is reflected in her refusal to accept the current situation.

Her inquiries both affirm her intellectual independence and highlight the inequities ingrained in caste and class structures. Moyna continues to ask questions in spite of being made fun of and disciplined for her inquisitiveness. By doing this, she regains the right to information, which is sometimes denied to kids from underprivileged families. Through Moyna, Mahasweta Devi criticizes the ways in which governing bodies stifle the curiosity of the poor in order to keep themselves in power.

Moyna’s transformation into a teacher at the story’s conclusion represents the transforming and empowering power of education. The narrator joyfully informs us that she is now a primary school teacher. “And she continues to ask questions”(Devi 23). This conclusion supports the notion that young people from tribal communities are active agents of change rather than passive victims. Moyna’s transformation from a rebellious youngster to a teacher is evidence of how education and inquiry can change people’s lives and the futures of entire communities. Her “why”-filled voice serves as a metaphor for the voice of a new generation committed to ending patterns of exclusion and ignorance.

Negotiating Education and Heritage in Red Blooms in the Forest

In *Red Blooms in the Forest*, Nilima Sinha tells the tale of Sumi, a young tribal girl whose life is a struggle between the need to preserve her cultural heritage and the allure of contemporary schooling. As a member of a tribal society that lives in the forest, Sumi finds herself torn between two worlds: the promises of a better future provided by education and contemporary values, and her ancestral customs anchored in the forest. Sumi communicates her internal conflict early on in the book: “I feel like the forest is calling me back sometimes. However, after that, I think about school, books, and the world outside the woods”. This quotation perfectly expresses her mental and emotional predicament, where ambition and belonging are incompatible all the time.

Sinha presents school as a place of both empowerment and alienation rather than as a straightforward fix. Although Sumi is aware that education might benefit her people, she is concerned about the loss of tribal identity. Sumi says, “I haven’t forgotten,” in response to her friend’s accusation that she has forgotten her heritage. I wish to learn more and keep in mind. I want everyone to be aware of us. This statement demonstrates her goal of fusing cultural activism with education; rather than abandoning her background, she wants to include it into the contemporary narrative.

The book also looks at how outside factors like political scheming, deforestation, and outside interference make Sumi’s decisions even more difficult. She is still committed to pursuing a career that respects her community, though. She embodies the anxiety and optimism of her generation when she tells her younger brother, “We have to go to school and we have to save the forest.” Through Sumi, Sinha highlights that tribal youth are actively creating a new identity rather than being divided between two, linking tradition with advancement to ensure cultural survival in a world that is changing.

Cultural Displacement and Identity in Andamans Boy

Through the tale of Arif, a Jarawa kid who is taken from his jungle home and placed in the regimented setting of a Chennai boarding school, Zai Whitaker’s *Andamans Boy* examines the profoundly personal effects of cultural dislocation. Arif is confused and uneasy in the beginning of the book: “Everything was strange—the smells, the clothes, the food, and the language.” He missed the warmth of his people, the sounds of birds, and the quiet of the forest. His cultural shock at having to adjust to a world so different from his tribal upbringing is reflected in this early assessment. As he struggles with the loss of familiarity and belonging, Arif’s displacement is not just physical but also emotional and psychological.

Arif has identity issues throughout the book. His cultural identity is being undermined in the process of his planned assimilation into mainstream society. He falters when questioned about his history, saying, “I used to live in the forest, but now I don’t know where I belong.” The agonizing uncertainty of a young child torn between two worlds—one of tradition and one of modernity—is encapsulated in this admission. Whitaker does not portray Arif as defenceless in spite of this. Rather, he becomes more resilient over time. He learns that identity may be maintained even when the environment changes as he makes friends and gradually adjusts.

Arif returns to the Andamans in the novel’s concluding chapters and muses, “The forest hadn’t changed.” And, not entirely, neither had I. This moment is significant because it implies that a fundamental sense of self persists in spite of cultural dislocation. Whitaker shows via Arif’s journey that tribal kids have the power to reclaim and renew their identities on their own terms, while frequently being caught in the waves of change.

Youth as Cultural Intermediaries and Agents of Change

Tribal youth appear in all three books not just as characters but also as cultural bridges—figures who straddle the divide between the old and the new, with the capacity to reinterpret, revitalize, and pass down traditions in modern settings. The diverse challenges encountered by tribal youth in India today are reflected in Moyna’s unwavering quest for education, Sumi’s internal struggle between contemporary education and tribal values, and Arif’s cross-cultural experience. Despite the differences in their difficulties, all of the stories have one thing in common: young people actively participate in establishing tradition rather than passively inheriting it.

The young protagonists of *Andamans Boy*, *Red Blooms in the Forest*, and *The Why-Why Girl* act as cultural bridges, bridging the gap between tradition and modernity, and become change agents in their communities. These characters actively participate in forming their identities and affecting people around them rather than being passive observers. This function is best illustrated by Moyna in *The Why-Why Girl*, who is always asking, “Why should I sweep your courtyard? Why am I unable to study? Her inquiries go beyond simple curiosity; they are both acts of defiance against societal norms and strategies for asserting her place in an exclusive society. Her development from a tribal youngster to a schoolteacher represents a shift for her community as a whole: “She is currently teaching in a primary school. She continues to ask questions, too.

Sumi handles the difficulties of environmental advocacy and education in *Red Blooms in the Forest* in a similar manner. She maintains that “we have to save the forest, and we have to go to school,” while being torn between her tribal history and the demands of the outside world. Sumi understands that maintaining cultural identity entails creating room for both advancement and cultural identity preservation. Her remarks highlight her function as a link between generations, respecting the past while planning for the future.

Arif faces cultural displacement in *Andamans Boy*, but he eventually recovers his identity. He says, “The forest hadn’t changed,” when he has returned to it. And, not entirely, neither had I. His ability to maintain his roots despite being altered by a new world is shown in this comment. Moyna, Sumi, and Arif collectively demonstrate how tribal youth are altering tradition rather than just passing it down. They are strong forces for cultural continuity and change because their voices lead their communities through change.

Conclusion

Together, *The Why-Why Girl*, *Red Blooms in the Forest*, and *Andamans Boy* provide complex and perceptive viewpoints on the challenges and goals faced by young tribal people. These characters are able to mediate between tradition and modernity since they are both active agents of transition and carriers of cultural heritage. Through their experiences, the writers demonstrate

the adaptability and tenacity of tribal identities as well as the vital role that youth play in ensuring that these identities are experienced and reinvented in meaningful ways rather than being forgotten or romanticized. These literary works provide to a more comprehensive understanding of the indigenous experience in India by expressing the complexity of tribal youth in transition. They believe that a generation that dares to dream big, ask questions, and define their future with both vision and roots will determine the future of indigenous communities.

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