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**A study of cultural aspects of tribal society through the novel “*When the Kurinji Blooms*”
by Rajam Krishnan**

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Abstract

Literature is widening its branches, and it encompasses all spheres of life. With the aid of literature, one can trace out the whole history of one’s culture right from its roots. The novel *When the Kurinji Blooms*, by Rajam Krishnan, focuses on the Tamil tribal life of Badagas in Nilgiris, TamilTNadu. The rich Badaga culture is redolent of the ancient, age-old Indian mentality of surviving and thriving in the environment. Compared to the other hill tribes, the outstanding characteristics of the Badagas are their progressiveness. In intelligence, and adaptability to European methods and occupations, they are far superior. Their dwellings, cultivated lands and general mode of life, all manifest this superiority. It is also seen that despite the rapid modernization underway around the World as well as in India, the Badagas are seen to be content with their own culture, as well as interacting with a World order, to create balance between the new and the old orders.

Keywords: culture, tribes, tradition, modernization.

This paper aims to explore the cultural and traditional aspects of the Badaga society in *When the Kurinji Blooms* by Rajam Krishnan, written originally in the regional Indian language Tamil as Kurinji and then translated to English by Uma Narayanan and Prema Seetharam. “*When the Kurinji Blooms*” is a saga of three generations of two families of Badagas traversing fifty years. It begins with the Badagas who live a peaceful and a content life in the hill sides of Nilgiri which is covered with Kurinji flowers every twelve years, and it ends with the dawn of new changes in the life of the people like hydro-electric power dam in the hill.

The story starts with a nine-year-old boy, Jogi and ends with the same man who becomes an old man and witnesses all the changes which occurs in the hill. Jogi is the protagonist of the novel. At the time of

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his young age, the hatti enjoys the environmental beauty of the blue mountain. As he grows up, the aura of the Nilgiri undergoes remarkable change. The changes destroy the peace and contentment of the inhabitants. Earlier, the hatti people cultivated samai, ragi and potatoes for food. Later, the hatti people started growing tea plants with the sole objective of making money. Not only money matters, but also, the food habits have changed due to the influence of modern culture. Eating meat was considered as a crime by the elders earlier, but now they take pride in the fact that their children are eating meat. Once money becomes the core objective, culture and tradition begin to fade. Earlier, Badagas celebrated the rite of milking as an important custom. But later, boys are no longer initiated into the rite of milking at the age of nine, nor are they entrusted with household duties. Everything has changed, even nature.

The blue mountain has also been influenced by modern terms like strike, election, and campaign. They stick notices on rocks and on huge pipes with slogans. It is all new to the hills but Jogi remains unaffected by all these changes and the family of Jogi who stubbornly clings to the old ways and is left behind while that of Krishnan, the grandson of the village head who moves with the modern time meets with progress. Language plays an important

role in the post-colonial texts. It reveals the identity of the people. In *When the Kurinji Blooms*, as the writer belongs to Tamil Nadu, the language has the flavor of the Tamil culture and the original tribal language of Badagas.

The prime language spoken by the tribes is the Badaga language, which is the mixture of Kannada and Tamil. Though there is no script for this language, they have a rich oral tradition of folk tales, poetry and songs. These people have a specific language called “Badugu” which occupy the Nilgiri district of Tamil Nadu. The tradition Badaga man wears a dhoti and a dupati which is a long piece of thick special weave of cotton and a turban. The Badaga women’s apparel consists of a thundu, mundu, and pattu. The thundu is a piece of white rectangular cloth worn like a shawl over the shoulders. The pattu is a scarf-like piece of white cotton cloth worn square across the forehead and tucked in at the back of the head. Their ornaments consist of brass, iron, and silver.

Girls of marriageable age are tattooed on the forehead and the chest are also tattooed with lines and dots. The Badagas are gentle and light-hearted people who are fond of music and songs. The tribal believe in black magic spells, the spirit, and rebirth. Though they are the true believers of God, and they live

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very close to nature, they believe in superstitious things which sometimes dominate their life. In the novel, Jogi, as a young boy, hears stories of Kurumba tribe from his grandmother. The Kurumbas are the forest dwellers. They practice black magic secretly at the dead of night inside the forest. His grandmother used to tell him how these assume the form of a dog, a jackal or an act and cast evil spells. The Badagas used to pay dues to the Kurumbas but also other tribes who are living in the hill.

Once Lingaya tells his wife, Madhi; “Look at the Todas. They don’t work on the land. Just because we live on their hill, we give them grain every harvest. We also give grain to the Kothars who make our pots and implements, and provide music at our funerals. Fearing the spells of the forest Kurumbas we give them whatever they ask for.” (WKB 34). In every aspect of life, the belief of the Badagas helps them survive, hopefully. For instance, when Jogi has happened to know about Paru’s love with Krishnan, he asks for some roots from the Kurumbas, and he believes that the roots will help Paru’s lover to lift the stone in the stone lifting competition and to get married happily. The Kurumba’s root has apparently cured his father’s fever, but not Paru’s love. Later, Jogi has realized that how stupid he has been to believe in the magical power of a mere root. But nowadays, everything has gone wrong in

the belief and the tribal have started realizing their foolish faith in the black magic spells and spirits.

The ceremonies related to Badaga marriages are worth mentioning and are very colorful in its settings. The novel elaborately describes the marriage ceremony of Paru with Rangan who has won her in the stone lifting competition. On this auspicious day in the month of Avani, after the marriage ceremony, when the bride as, “May you take responsibility for the growth of this family, which has continued from generation to generation like water flowing from a pot.” (WKB, 112). There are some festivals which are celebrated by the tribal with their own custom and tradition. The life of tribal is like a festival, and they celebrate it with great enthusiasm. Rituals and ceremonies are inseparable in culture in the life of tribal. Rajam Krishnan snap chats the characteristic spirit of the Badaga culture as manifested in their attitudes, aspirations, and customs. The Badagas follow Hinduism and follow Lord Shiva. They have numerous shrines and temples. They celebrate festivals like Hetha Hubba, Deiva Hubba, Dodda Hubba, Sakalathi Hubba, Jadeswami Hubba, and Mangkali Hubba. They also celebrate their major festivals like Diwali, Pongal, Ayutha Pooja as per the direction of their custom and tradition.

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The Badagas who live in Tamil Nadu celebrate Tamil festivals like Thai Pongal, fire walking festival on coals in front of the temple, and sowing festival. All these festivals are related to the harvest of the field.

The ritual of walking on fire coals has been performed in the Madalingshwara temple of Keezhamalai. They believe that everyone will rejuvenate by fresh blood and the bare branches will sprout new leaves after performing the rituals. The novel narrates the fire walking festival as “seven men, their shaven heads smeared with sandal paste and their necks adorned with the garlands of kadamba flowers, came singing and dancing. The sounds of the Kothar’s musical instruments—the kuzhal, the kombu, the thaarai and thappatai—seemed to rend the air.” (WKB,120). The fire walkers came out of the pit without singed, without burning their hairs on the toe. If any hairs are singed, it is a sign of ill-fortune, or even death. Lingaya has participated in the fire-walking festival after several weeks of fasting and other rituals to get a newborn to his daughter-in-law. Each and every tribe of the hill considers the blue mountain as their Mother God and claims the root of kinship in the land. The Kothar tribes are well versed in music, and they play instruments like kuzhal, thaarai, thappatai, and parai. Their promising music is considered as the

essential part of the Badaga’s rites in life and death. Death is celebrated like a festival by the tribes of India because they believe in rebirth. So, they send the soul and body happily to the heaven to get a good soul for the next birth. Lingayya has a belief that he will be reborn in his wife’s lap as her grandson. After the death of the person, the Badagas have the custom of placing a gold piece on the mouth of the dead person which is called Verayapanamand to pour milk over it. The gold piece will slowly slide down the tongue with the milk, which confirms the death of the person. Lingaya’s funeral is fulfilling the tradition by having a grand funeral of constructing a seven tiered funeral car decorated with cloth and streamers to carry the great man’s body. These are the facts which show that the novel consists the taste of southern culture of India, especially the culture of the tribal people (Badagas).

However, The Badaga tribe is not yet added in the central list of scheduled tribes. The state government has also written to the Prime Minister regarding the requisition to consider the request of the inclusion of Badaga community of Nilgiris in the scheduled tribes list at the earliest by mentioning how the people are still following their customs and culture without losing its color. Rajam Krishnan’s *When the Kurinji Blooms* (a novel that was originally in Tamil and later translated). She wrote that novel after thoroughly

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researching the life of the people of Nilgiris. Though she has written many other novels, equally well-researched, this is the most highly acclaimed of them all. In this novel, a broad spectral view, an intensive timeline of the life of the Badaga people of Nilgiris is given by the author. The conflict amidst man, nature and development has always affected people living in marginalized communities and leaves them either displaced or forces them to be partners in the demolition of nature and natural resources. The novel traces the rich culture of Badagas, their struggle to compete with urban forces and finally their resignation to their fate.

The photographic eye of Rajam Krishnan has missed nothing of the characteristic spirit of the Badaga culture, and he spent many years in Kundah. When she went into the hattis, she familiarized herself with the language, and became an observer of their life, of all their rites and rituals, which she also feelingly and vividly describes. Though *When the Kurunji Blooms* has been acclaimed as an anthropological novel, it is by no means a dry narrative. The emotional turmoil of a people in a state of transition is brought out in all its powerful intensity and pathos. Rajam Krishnan's use of anthropomorphism renders her descriptions of nature extremely complex. She has invested the mountains, the sky, the Earth, and the sun with moods ranging from

gentleness to passion, generosity to cruelty. These passages often appear as prelude to events in which the characters experience the same emotions. Her intellectual and emotional involvement with the theme is evident in the delineation of the story and its characters.

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