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## **The Depiction of Decaying Culture in *An Abbreviated Child: Gloom to Bloom* by Rita Garg**

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### **Abstract**

Culture is a way of life. It is a powerful tool for survival. It has different meanings for different persons. For some, it is a good literature, art and music and for others it is a belief and behaviour. Rita Garg's novel *An Abbreviated Child: Gloom to Bloom* has efficiently shown the picture of decaying culture of the present society, where on one side, there are characters that represent progressive society, while others show the decaying society. The present society which is involved in its own world has neglected the generation of old cultures which have played a key role in its development. Through her characters, she has depicted various aspects of present society. In her novel, she shows the life and misery of the labour class and labouring women. The poor women practice 'opium licking' on their children and the latter become alcoholics. This she has shown through the character of Kalia. His mother, like other mothers or motherly women, did so under compulsion but the decay of culture uncoils

itself to the core. As due to the effect of globalization, though people are getting appreciation, education and knowledge but they are losing their customs and traditions which were the boon to them. Our culture is decaying because people are neglecting their traditions, manners, rituals and customs in search of money, status, power and pelf. They are very far away from the real life. They are adopting the western culture blindly without knowing whether it is good or bad.

### **Keywords**

Culture; Cultural Study; Opium Licker; Decay; Shivalik Hills; Poverty; Labour; and Education.

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Culture is defined as the systematic philosophy of life or as the behaviour, beliefs and symbols that people accept. These customs passed from one generation to the other because it transforms their behaviour and character. “Cultural studies are an academic discipline which combines political economy, communication, sociology, social theory, literary theory, and media theory etc. to study cultural studies researcher often focuses on how a particular phenomenon relates to ideology, nationality, ethnicity, social class and gender.” (*Cultural Studies and Literature*) Culture also plays an important role in art and literature. Raymond William’s “cultural materialism” plays a dominant role in the field of cultural studies. William’s definition of culture is apt and significant in this connection:

Culture is one of the two or three complicated words in English. This is so partly because of its intricate historical development in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible system of thought. (*Culture and Society* 76)

The process of culture has become so powerful that it decides the identity of a man on the one hand and on the other hand it assimilates the different cultures in a single thread. If we talk about the relevance of culture in the perspective of present scenario it is more complex than earlier. The impact of globalization has increased the cultural differences. Due to culture studies, society has undergone many changes such as the change in life style, behaviour, perception and religion etc. As due to the effect of globalization though people are getting much knowledge in different spheres of life but they are more inclined towards the western culture which is totally different from the eastern culture. They are very far away from the real life.

So, in this paper, I am taking up Rita Garg's novel, *An Abbreviated Child: Gloom to Bloom* and have tried to trace the decay in culture through different characters of the novel. The culture does not have a fixed definition; it changes from time to time, generation to generation. In this context Jordan and Weedon have given a beautiful explanation of culture and society through the definition of William:

William's culture and society began to rethink the relationship between culture and society, and extend the range of Cultural texts deemed worthy of analysis. Raymond William's work, in particular, was highly influential in the early development of cultural studies. (Literary Theory and Criticism 246)

The novelist, very aptly describes the condition of the poor folk who are passing their life in pain and sufferance because they don't get opportunities and life is stuck for them. Any attempt made to get over, sticks their feet and hands in their misery-woven net. In this novel, the setting covers the land from Canada and America to Delhi and Uttarakhand. The folk talked about belong to the Shivalik Hills, the border hilly area. Incidentally, this hill range also has Jaunsar Babar area where Draupadi was married to the Pandava brothers in

the *Mahabharata*. The Shivalik hill range has constraints of its own type and that is projected well but in precise language by the novelist.

This area has more of labour class and the labouring women keep doing their job. Nonetheless, they have to cut short the time to be given to children; consequentially, the child may or may not grow to the proper circumstances in life. Kalia, the villainy following man, was born as a handsome and active boy but also naughty. His labour class mother often made the child lick opium so that she would be working and the child would sleep quietly and not face hazards at such sites as quarry, damn or landslide.

As a matter of fact, this practice, in this area of hills, produces not one but many Kalias. The poor women practise this on their children and the latter become alcoholics. Kalia gets used to drinks and dies early. Prior to his death, he sells his sister Gauri, for Income Tax free Rs. 20,000. All the time he needs money. This act of Kalia is not uncommon. This hillside is known for the payment made by the groom. Here, the buyer of Gauri makes her work as an animal to plough the farm and to work as a woman otherwise.

This entire novel deals with the dismal scene of poverty and over population. Under these circumstances, the effort to uplift the poor through education and employment are worth acclamation. To improve upon further, some individuals ought to come forward and help the needy. No matter, at what level. Here the novelist talks of an orphanage run by Mrs Preet Rani. Over here, many orphans are given proper care. As per the talent, they achieve the difficult goals.

This region of Shivalik Hills is not prosperous. To fight poverty, both men and women work. In this race, the young children suffer. Their sufferings of childhood follow them till late ages. An easy way to keep the son under control is to control the senses. This is so widespread that no one minds this and no one pays heed to check the practice. The long practice has become the part of culture even. It is taken for granted that such a life style is normal.

The repercussions are too much. The character of Kalia suffices to prove this. In his case, it was his mother who used to make him lick opium when her mother-in-law was unwell. The permanent loss out of the event is that the abbreviation of the child is a natural outcome. The growth of a race depends on the strength of the entire community. A weak race is no race. Rather this is to mar the race or the culture. To further the cultural scene and repercussions, the novelist also makes a comparative study by expanding the background of the novel from the Shivalik Hills to Canada. Undoubtedly, human sensibility is alike all around. That is, human beings are not always necessarily rational even in the best circumstances. In such a critical situation it is difficult to get solace and comfort. The words of Krishnan are very apt in relation to the character of a man. He says:

If an individual is judged by his character and morality, society is judged by its culture and tradition” said Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. Culture means the way of life followed by a community that consists of custom, tradition, religious practices and the human values they cherish. Every culture has its distinct positive features. (The Great Indian Culture. Speaking Tree)

In this novel, it is shown that the hills have many dull men. The reason is explained through the characterization of Kalia and his ironical life since birth. To buy liquor is his need and he has to supplement finances; he wants Gauri to earn more. She is not in a position to earn more through hard work. To fight the situation, he with all his taciturnity arranges to sell his sister Gauri.

The man who comes forward to buy is a weak man of this area only and spends money on her to supplement the roles of a woman and an ox:

Poverty thy hood uncoils often. Kalia would be a talkative man for a while. Later, he was to be dumb—Gauri a forced dumb—he willingly so ever and anon. Gauri’s buyer had constraints beyond

control. His poverty-stricken condition could not allow him much to spend. Last week only, an ox of his died. The plough could not move without a couple of oxen. It would—the purchase of Gauri—definitely save him two purchases. The bride too was an item to purchase. She was so young. Always busy with physical work. (38)

All this kills the life force in her. She tries to commit suicide but God saves her. One day, after widowhood, she reaches back to her family. Kalia is no more. His wife is remarried to Mahato. Kalia's daughter is Sonam and Mahato's son is Ravi. It is really an ironical but actually factual example of the decaying culture. The brother who is supposed to take care of the safety of a sister sells his sister for money. In the modern society, a man has lost his sense to that extent where one cannot reach the core:

As far as child atrocities are concerned, they are often neglected or abused in a family or an institutional setting by those known to them. It is less common for a child to be abused by a stranger. Radha, Chhotu, Gauri etc. are made to suffer first by their biological parents, brothers or sisters: "Kalia sold sister, Gauri and later died of country made liquor. (Agarwal 125)

Keeping this in mind, the novelist coins the literary term 'genderex' as the word gender depicts the social aspects and distinction; and, sex is a biological and nature given discrimination. The folk scene is dismal but the novelist also suggests a way to bring woman out of this vicious circle. Accordingly, free education and books in library help the poor women and Kalia's daughter Sonam represents this. Her growth as an educated working woman suggests Kalia's mother to pronounce that Gauri is 'The Last Sufferer.' Meaning thereby that free education by government would help women grow. Education makes a man perfect in his life. It is really a good tool to make a man's future bright.

Characters don't internalize their feelings and seldom are plagued by mental torment. The characters of the novel are so simple and much far away from the malice and jealousy. They have presence of such expressions in life as love, hatred, greed, fear and jealousy. The life of the rustic people is very difficult. The protagonist of the novel suffers a lot; her path of life is full of thorns though she enjoys heavenly bliss at the end of the story.

Literature, based on hilly areas, is related to the illiterate people of that society. In the journey of life, the protagonist gathers courage and strength against the opposite circumstances of life and after that, appears the achievement of the fruit of success which adds heroic dimensions. The themes related to these areas are heart touching. It is, generally, in simple and colloquial language. Gauri reaches home. In her mother's house, she talks to Kalia's wife frankly:

I say so because I know the taste of hunger.

I know the labour of an ox.

I know the anger of a husband.

I know the lack of motherhood.

I know the lack of companionship.

Without the loss of virginity, I know the loss of womanhood.

I know the stranger's status in my husband's house. (54)

This painful expression of Gauri, stating those facts of her life which marred every iota of joy during these years passed with the husband who is incapacitated in every sense of the word. 'Don't you worry about Sonam. She will change her' (55). Gauri did not die. Anyhow, she understands the world around. Gauri knows that untimely death of a young girl may be her destiny. She vehemently expresses that the girl might suffer at the hand of outsiders and her life be curbed: The novelist sets a moral through the growth of Chandrima. She is an orphan brought up by Radha, an orphan, sold thrice and rehabilitated five times. Radha is sheltered by Mrs. Preet Rani in her

orphanage which is later on handed over to Radha. Chandrima returns to India although she discusses much before leaving America.

Deewangi is a pinnacle, madness is a void; deewangi is surrender, madness is a downfall; deewangi is creation, madness is destruction; deewangi is the last rite of funeral leading to God, madness is last but that act which does not reach even one's own self. (77)

She must help the needy ones. Over there, in America, she recollects the scene of a haat in India which is a total loss of morality. Way back in India, she came across child labour, and their psyche; and, above all those who are grownups but have the similar attitude to life because their past was no better. One day in a haat, she had met a boy who strongly expressed his philosophy of morality which could only benumb Chandrima: "Why do you talk of morals? Yes, I raped the girl at the age of thirteen. Your atmosphere is different and my ethics is strange" (78).

Women are treated as slaves. As they have no value, status and respect in a society. The culture of man and woman discrimination still persists in the society. Minister ji used Radha only as a show piece. The domination of man over woman is still there. It shows the culture of power over weak. Poverty is the main reason to accept the order of the rich person. Due to the lack of money, girls are forced to marry an uneven match. They cannot revolt against this heinous practice of selling. From morning till evening they do hard work for the betterment of the family. In a modern society, every man is fixing his own limit according to the desires. The problem of unemployment is there. Thus the unrest of desires proves as the leading cause of poverty. Even a father is ready to sell her child or make her child an opium licker.

The novelist sets a moral through the characters of Chandrima and Ravi. Both these characters are good at studies. Education is free with the attempts of government. Chandrima goes to America for Ph. D. and returns, leaving



behind Bon, a fellow scholar who has much affection for her, with the sole idea to help others. There is Bon, a fellow researcher of Chandrima. His father in Canada has damaged his kidneys by drinking too much. In India, the poor class is used to the same sin. Radha, the protagonist, is sold first by her father because like Kalia, he too does not work and earn. Like, Gauri's husband, Kalia is not actively earning. Kalia and Gauri's husband die early. Radha in the end says: "When history is the biggest lie; Myth is not proven scientifically and culture is a changing phase then plentiful of succour ought to be extended to the abbreviated ones". (Garg 104)

As per the efforts of the individual, the novelist refers to Indian myth, as well as history. The historical example taken up is of Panna Dhaya also who fights for the good of all. Then from myth only, the reference is made to King Bhagirath whose efforts enrich the earth with the flow of the Ganges. Lord Krishna proves the best democrat as he is always in the company of the masses. Nevertheless, in the contemporaneous scenario, the Anti National Minister Ji makes every situation to harm the nation and misuse democracy. This does not relate to him only, but in other countries also, the history of Kings, Maharajas, Louis, Pharaohs, Czars this or that, does not prove them up to the mark.

Another extremely relevant issue analysed and compared by the novelist is that of a royal mother with a poor surrogate mother. In Indian myth, the royal mother of Abhimanyu imparts knowledge to him in her womb, while today there is a surrogate mother fighting her own poverty. For her, it is beyond capacity to teach the embryo as her womb is a 'never-never-nest' for the unborn. Since birth, to bring up the child devotedly has lost value for the larger number. Lots of succour alone has strength to save masses and bring them at par with the better races.

However, a poor person on the wrong path could lead the family to destruction. In the concluding paragraph, Radha implies this as well. She

realizes that culture is in a changing phase. The increasing poverty, a man's inability to control desires is creating that dark hollow pit which swallows endlessly in abundance - good or bad alike. The submersion, regarding education, shelter and employment, comes with the efforts of government and also through individual's efforts. Radha always believed so and started whispering to self and Chhotu, "First of all, Fate sells all souls in humans to Destiny and the latter gets rid of this burden by transferring that to all sorts of people. How often the Destiny would make the individual rehabilitate" (7).

The culture of drinking is spreading fast in hilly areas. It spoils the life of innocent children and the wives of the drunkards. In spite of the bad habit of the father, children generally retain compassion and never complain. Radha expresses her sympathy in these words "Baba, now you are crying. In your drunken state, you beat us, but we never cry. We never cry"(25). It is really shameful that due to a man the whole family is in a great danger and it is the helplessness of them that they cannot revolt against him. Indian society compels to accept those age old traditions and customs whether they are right or wrong: "Amma says that you are our shield. Woman needs man" (25). Without husband the life of a woman is worthless in a society: "Radha, you talk fine. I am sleepy now." 'Amma—Baba was shouting. It is much better that you have come now.' "Beti Radha, I wish I were dead or never returned here. This rascal drinks too much. My bones scream for fatigue and pain. He lies down and shouts and beats and kicks. The other day I woke up because he was suffocating me to death" (25).

Thus Rita Garg in her novel *An Abbreviated Child: Gloom to Bloom* shows the face of the present society which is the melting pot of different ideologies. The present society which is involved in its own world has neglected the generation of old cultures which have played a key role in its development. Through her characters, she has depicted various aspects of present society. She has shown how poverty has made Kalia addicted to opium. His mother is

responsible for this condition but she did so under compulsion. The novel describes mainly two practices in order to show the decay of the society. The lower class baby may be fully exposed to, before age, because the 'hut is too small.' Secondly, the woman or the girl is an item to sell or purchase. Through these characters and their life, Garg has successfully shown the decay of the culture in the society.

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