



**Exploring the Trajectories of Myth,
Truth, and Childhood in Mahasweta
Devi's *The Armenian Champa Tree***

Jabeen Fatima

Independent Scholar, Lucknow, India

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Abstract

The distinctiveness of Mahasweta Devi's writings lies in their element of resistance. Given the celebration of her oeuvre as a body of serious activist writing, what is often overlooked is that Devi is also a writer of children's fiction. This paper focuses on *The Armenian Champa Tree* (2000), one of her novellas written for a young readership. The narrative unravels those malevolent aspects of folk culture and social behavior that Devi believes are responsible for regression and self-defeat among individuals and families, especially those from the under-class, and the deleterious effects on children. The paper discusses the susceptibility of this key Indian demographic to rumors and mistruths and the author's foregrounding of recuperative strategies that exist or could be brought into practice. The concern with witch-hunts, for example, is an urgent and pertinent one in a global context, given the rampant planned slaughters of individuals and families by vengeful parties on the pretext of purgation.

Keywords: Mahasweta Devi, superstition, caste, oral tradition, folklore, rumour, propaganda, subaltern

Cultures are humanly made structures of both authority and participation, benevolent in what they include, incorporate, and validate, less benevolent in what they exclude and demote.

(Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 15)

Cultures are an amalgamation of truth and fiction. Tentative notions have pre-existed and working hypotheses have preceded every discovery made by humans. "Given the great gulf between being and knowing, between his essence and existence, man has no choice really than to believe in one fiction or the other", avers Chinua Achebe in his ruminations on fiction (140). Humans spin fictive theories to make sense of the world around them until these are replaced by new knowledge. The creation of myth to sustain survival is justified only if it is benign and recognized as provisional, that is, it does not develop into a tradition of abuse, and is concurrent with the seeking after truth, thus implying that it repudiates absoluteness, authority, and tyranny. Differentiating between "fictions that help and fictions that hinder" Achebe classifies superstition as "malignant fiction" (143).

It can therefore be said that while some domination is externally imposed on societies and cultures, all domination is not external; every individual imagination and the collective imagination of the society people inhabit holds a great sway upon the human state of wellness and being. Naming the imagination, a "vital element of our total nature", Achebe thus implies that, "If we starve it or pollute it the quality of our life is depressed or soiled" (147). People are enslaved or liberated by what they believe in. The nature and magnitude of particular beliefs has varied determinants. In the ideal state of relative freedom one is at liberty to believe what one chooses; however, beliefs are scarcely sterile when they are held by people in powerful positions and come to be the beliefs of a majority. Psychological studies emphasize the power of influence resident in peer pressure, propaganda, heredity and environment and, while learning is seen to nurture hesitation, curiosity

and the need for further enquiry, the less one knows the more susceptible one becomes to accepting as credible the beliefs of people that surround them. This credulity is then the opportunity that devious people impose on people with insecure complexes, possibly pre-existent as “dissociated unconscious components similar to those described as ‘subconscious fixed ideas’ by the French psychologist, Pierre Janet” often leading to terrifying consequences that leave a society shamefaced and earns it infamy in history (Stevens, 17).

Tradition binds a people in togetherness. However, the bond gradually transforms into bondage once obeisance to it is sanctified as unquestionable. From tradition emanates the pressure of conformity, and in the urge to banish difference, lies the seed of social intolerance and communalism. This urge in turn derives from being terrorized at the prospect of change as irregularity, of viewing the different and unique as anomalous or paranormal.

The desire for inclusiveness is fundamental to culture yet such inclusiveness is also constantly debated. However, it is what Said terms as the “less benevolent” facet of a culture that often sounds the death knell for life as it existed, as it was known and lived by certain unfortunate individuals and it is under the influence of certain malignant fictions and distorted truths that cultures become suicidal. This tendency “to assert their sense of the local and the specific as a recuperative strategy in the face of the erasure of difference [is] characteristic of colonialist representation”, and which is identified by Griffiths as a key feature of society among Australian Aboriginals, holds true for most cultures the world over (165).

A people marginalized due to socio-economic status have scant access to sophisticated learning and education. Given that such backward communities are the most distressed of people struggling with basic everyday issues of survival, the combination of ignorance, imagination and superstition among them makes the subaltern from among them (read: women and children, flora and fauna) most vulnerable to hard-faced, often mortal, oppression.

This paper studies the politics and power structures inherent in the superstitious beliefs among the native peoples and lower socioeconomic classes of India and their conditioned response and hopeful resistance, in the light of Mahasweta Devi’s *The Armenian Champa Tree*, a novella translated from Bengali by Nirmala Kanti Bhattacharjee. The story projects the sway of illusory rumour upon the collective perception and imagination of a society. Though a significant component of tribal existence, superstition in this text is a metaphor for regressive traditional codes and the faith imposed in them. Nuanced with the tyrannical power of propaganda, the story comments upon the deeper and more important subject of interpersonal trust and hope in human understanding, while forcefully advocating the need for urgent intervention and education to avert abuse. A significant feature of the story analyzed is the celebration of the resilience of childhood. Through the character of a nine-year-old boy, Matos, *The Armenian Champa Tree* hints that a possible solution to the plague of propaganda is compassionate querying and unrelenting defiance in the face of hysteria.

Set in eighteenth-century, poverty-stricken rural Bengal, the novella recounts how a people still recovering from a devastating famine are easily manipulated by a visiting mendicant. The deceitful tantric mystic makes a terrifying prophecy about ruin approaching this settlement of sinners in the form of a tsunami-like flood, but promises to avert it if they arrange for an elaborate Yana (religious ceremony) to worship the goddess Kali for three days and nights with a hundred and eight silver hibiscus flowers, completing it with a good animal sacrifice. Mato, a boy of the Bono tribe, becomes embroiled in the charlatan's drama after his naughty goat Arjun offends the pseudo-godman. The vengeful occultist convinces his credulous audience that the Goddess would not be appeased with any other animal and Mato is forced to leave home, despite his frail health due to a congenital heart condition, when it becomes unsafe for his beloved pet.

The Armenian Champa Tree begins as follows: "In the year seventy-six – that is, 1176 by the Bengali calendar – there was a terrible famine in this land of Bengal as you all know" (Devi 1). This very first sentence establishes the temporal milieu of the story. In drawing upon the linguistic calendar the text narrows its spatial focus, emphasizing the case-specificity of the predicament it raises. For the non-Bengali reader "the year seventy-six" requires some research. It is translated as 1769 in the Gregorian calendar, the year of the Great Bengal Famine that followed the ascension of the British to "Diwali" (the revenue administration of Indian territories), a backdrop which is crucial to the developments in the narrative.

The concerned governors greatly downplayed the calamity; their correspondence of 1769-1770 expresses only "apprehensions for the revenue, not of general famine in Bengal" conceding "that although the distress was undoubtedly very great, the Council had not yet found any failure in the revenue or stated payments" (Hunter 22). The eye-witness accounts of the 1770 famine appended to William W. Hunter's *Annals of Rural Bengal* present a telling picture of the prevailing insouciance. The authorities' overt concern with the effect of the famine on revenue had ensured little or no remission of tax to a populace whose "mortality" and "beggary," as they wrote, "exceed all description", ironically resulting in better collection in the famine year than in previous or subsequent years of plenty (404-05). Token alleviation gestures, including the movement of battalions from prominent cities such as Patna to Bexar, resulted in "an aggravation of the distress at Bexar, in the very center of the most cruelly stricken districts" (Annals, footnote 401).

The British and their local compradors, through their rigorous taxation, export and stowing away of produce for army maintenance and overall unconcern and negligence, catapulted the drought into the widespread plight of famine, claiming over one third of the population. To the indigenes, the British were only the liveried messengers, primarily there to collect revenue and enrich themselves as well as the local aristocracies. "Pay for the paddy Janakinath Singh loaned you during the famine" (Devi, *The Armenian* 5). The booted gentry, with their long sideburns, emerged as the corporal force of the "Mahajan's" (moneylenders), who found this calamity opportune to bond slaves. The barter of human freedom took place

in exchange for the sooty thumbprint of the unwitting victims, given against famine relief, under the patronage of an “honorable” administration that was ruthlessly practicing such despoilment and slavery the world over.

“All of you know about this devastating famine. But you don’t know about Mato or about the flowering champa tree in the Armenian Church in Behrampur” (Devi, *The Armenian* 2). The timeline and narrative bequeathed to us by history invariably highlights epochal developments, major events, and magnificent edifices; however, the minutiae around these usually disappear in time’s haze. The great disaster of the Bengal famine of 1769 is remembered today only for the immediate large-scale mortality it caused, yet its aftermath consists of the havoc of horror and antipathy it brought upon the mass psyche. And though power, and the forces it attracts, have forever hold written history in their thrall, that which is written alone cannot claim all of history: “Written and hallowed texts are not the only kinds of texts in a culture like the Indian. Oral traditions of every kind produce texts” (Ramanujan 4). Devi is at pains to establish the authenticity of her narrative, which is ostensibly sourced from local lore: “You have not read about these things anywhere. Not everything is written down in books.” The story is told in a colloquial mode with Mahasweta Devi, as the omniscient third person narrator, reiterating the believability of oral testimonies at repeated intervals, through such phrases as “It is said...”, “people say”, and remarking “Though not written down, it is all true” (*The Armenian* 3), thereby seeking to de-trivialize a little boy’s quest for his pet’s safety during such a historic period.

Mato’s intended destination is the Armenian church of Behrampur, which alone promises sanctuary to him and his goat kid Arjun from the virulent designs of a devious tantric, who has persuaded the people of Mato’s village and his family into hounding the innocent duo. The text familiarizes the reader with the milieu, family and community of Mato before embarking with him on his flight. Mato’s mother and elder brother are both assertive personalities and Mato’s brother, Chablis, an erstwhile espy in the ‘faun’ (army) of Nawaz Ali Verdi, is the “daredevil” among the Buenos. Unaccustomed to a resigned Bono existence; he is a loafer by day and a dacoit (armed robber) by night. The story of Chablis becoming a dacoit is related to major historical events, such as the British ascension to the Diwali and the Bengal famine. As they took charge of revenue collection, the British displaced the Nawab’s trained sepoy, while the great hunger and scarcity of the famine reduced traditional occupations of farming, fishing, and cane weaving to naught, leaving no options for Chablis and his combat-proficient colleagues who thence took to petty nocturnal dacoity, looting rations and clothes. Commenting on such events, Sartre notes that “their petty thefts mark the beginning of a resistance which is still unorganized” (5).

In times of such great dearth and with so many mouths to feed, Mato’s mother readily overcomes her scruples regarding Chablis, collecting his seemingly trifling, though significant, loot for the family while continually reprimanding him, fearful of his safety on having learnt of the government’s clamp-down designs on dacoits. Her misgivings arise from the dread of her son’s capture and execution, for which she beseeches

the kindness of “Mother Kali of the dacoits” for Chablis’s wellbeing (Devi, *The Armenian* 8). In this regard, it is clear that her sense of right and wrong is tempered by her reigning concern or fear. She is an exemplar of the characteristic typical of the rustic psyche: for anything such a person dreads or needs help with, he or she will conjure the relevant God: “The people of this village are afraid of God Shasta, Satrapy, Panchanand Baba, Goddess Sitala, Manasa and all their ilk” (Devi, *The Armenian* 13). The enumeration of the gods of small pox, fever and snake bites as the most feared and revered deities among the villagers speaks volumes about the various causes of their despair and frequent maladies, to assuage which they seek to appease these folk gods specific to those particular ailments. While Manasa is the feared snake goddess, Sitala is the ass-riding broom-clutching goddess of smallpox, who has for her consort the boar-faced Jvarasur (fever demon). The image of each deity is significant and reveals much about their devotees’ traditional ways of curing such illnesses.

In her own right, Mato’s Mother is a robust woman, and regarded as the “tigress” of the Bono quarters. She negotiates, on her hardworking people’s behalf, wages and incentives with the prospective employers, whenever they are summoned for work: “Mato’s mother is a natural leader” (Devi, *The Armenian* 11). Therefore, she, on account of her persona, appears intimidating to the landlord Janakinath Singh, who holds many grudges against this plain-spoken Bono woman who is the voice of her community, and Janakinath intends to settle scores with her one day. When he mocks her before the village crowd for rearing an inauspicious goat whose influence has made her obstinate and demanding, she is quick to call out his hypocrisy:

Mato’s mother said, ‘You give us paddy and rice during the famine, and scheme to swallow up our lands, hearths and homes - that’s why the boys say Janaki Singh does not belong here. He came here as the servant of the Seth’s. He bought his land and property by saving up all the tips given to him by their wives. That’s why he is so small-minded. (Devi, *The Armenian* 19)

The titter caused by this exchange stings Janaki to such an extent that he makes a “mental note that when the time was right” he would avenge this insult by reporting Chablis to the authorities and, thereby, show her family their rightful place (Devi, *The Armenian* 19).

Being born into such a daring family, Mato’s natural aversion to scuffles confuses his mother. He is afraid of the hunt and quakes at the sight of blood. Mato is a dreamer, having an essentially introverted, though distinctive temperament; he is respectful to elders and disposed to help with domestic chores. He exhibits no skill at regular Buno jobs, but prefers to roam alone and models unusual dolls and animals from clay, traits which cause his mother considerable confusion:

Are you the son of a painter or a potter? O Mato, why do you make dolls? [...] And if you have to make clay models of birds, cats, dogs, calves, squirrels and the like, then why don't you show them as they are? Who has ever heard of a green blackbird or an orange cat? Mato's mother feels like crying. (Devi, *The Armenian* 12)

Juxtaposed with the domineering natures seen in the remainder of his family, his characteristic coyness appears anomalous. After raising so many children without any major issues, at the age of fifty Mato's mother must deal with what she considers a problem child, and it is through the story that one discovers the socio-psychological impediments she faces in truly knowing her own child. She is torn between her traditional beliefs and her maternal love and, ultimately, miserably accepts her inability to comprehend the nature of her son: "Mato, you are my son, but I never understood you" (Devi, *The Armenian* 51). In this, Mato's mother is not an exception though; the obsession with conformance to traditional beliefs and the social norms which quantify accomplishment in pragmatic terms alone have long pervaded societies, irrespective of period or place.

In this atmosphere of lingering dread appears the dramatic "kalpak," a fraudulent mendicant who arrives at Mato's village with the sole objective of abusing the villagers' credulity and exploiting their hospitality, a performance already flagged by his prediction of an impending flood and his positing himself in the role of rescuer. Shortly before his pronouncement of the remedy to the coming calamity, the kalpak is butted by the goat, Arjun in the latter's eagerness to nibble at bananas offered to the phony God-man. The livid tantrism's subsequent comic attempt to hit the goat are thwarted by Mato's intervention resulting in the man's humiliation and increased fury. This results in a hysterical tirade against both child and kid, as he theatrically repeats a proclamation credited to the goddess Kali, who he claimed had appeared in his dream: "This animal has brought sin to your village. Because of him, the Ganga will overflow" (Devi, *The Armenian* 16).

The kalpak's pronouncement throws into turmoil Mato's internal life, as he is forced to question his presumptions about his immediate family. The family unit represents the basic natural element of any society. Bound in blood and love, it forms the safety cushion necessary to survive in a harsh world: "As Sartre would say, the family is united by the reciprocal internalization by each (whose token of membership is *precisely* this interiorized family) of each other's internalization. The unity of the family is in the interior of each *synthesis* and each synthesis is *bound* by reciprocal interiority *with* each other's internalization of each other's exteriorization" (Laing 5, emphasis in original). From the original father, mother, and child the family expands into a community, a formation of people with a common culture of shared history and belief system. It is

when the accusation of supernatural malevolence strikes Arjun that Mato discovers a contradiction in his family. While Chablis has severely reprimanded him, asking him to be grateful for having been spared his own life, Mato is most disappointed in his mother's unequivocal response: "Such things do happen [...]. If you let this goat go, you'll get ten more" (Devi, *The Armenian* 20). Arjun is Mato's family but his family has never internalized Arjun. While Mato does not care for any of the others, he has always viewed his mother as unafraid and resourceful, so when she disowns responsibility for his pet's safety, it baffles and hurts him, an example of the fears and beliefs of parents, especially those of the mother, greatly affecting children. Mato is astonished that his mother, too, could believe the rumour mongers, as it was she who had seen him bring up Arjun with so much care and love.

Yet Mato's mother has her own demons to conquer. She has always been fearless, as is evidenced in the text: "in the darkness of a new-moon night she can stroll through the jungle. In her youth, she used to drive prowling leopards away from the cowshed all by herself. Only holy men and mendicants scare her" (Devi, *The Armenian* 12). While she has known how to overcome tangible dangers it is the inexplicable maladies and the vague threats that she is unable to command. She is predisposed to attributing her son's timidity and incongruity to "perhaps a Sannyasi's curse" and makes similar presumptions about Mato which multiply and harden after the mendicant's fiasco. When Arjun is declared inauspicious on account of its black hide, the mother comes to view its supposed diabolic influence as the reason for Mato's anomalous character. That which cannot be explained is again attributed to the realm of magic or supernatural intervention. That Mato is her son and a natural component of her family is a fact, but his disqualifications, albeit in congruence with her reasoning, is what she has chosen to internalize.

Psychologists reaffirm the acknowledged significance of family and parental behavior during the formative years of childhood and adolescence: "Parents possess enormous influence in the lives of their children" (Brook 299). What parents practice, though, is more defining for children than what they verbally instruct, as children absorb and imitate what they observe through their family's interactions with the larger ecology and community, until such perception and practice in time integrates with their behavior and personality (Sheridan et al. 167). In addition, children put a great deal of trust in their elders, be they parents or siblings, as may be witnessed in prominent literature which extends across cultures and societies. To illustrate this point through two canonical American texts, the behavior of Jem and Scout Finch in Harper Lee's *to Kill a Mockingbird* is greatly determined by their father's response to various situations; in fact, they are extensions of Atticus' attitude and temperance (Lee). Similarly, J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* climaxes with Holden Caulfield's nervous breakdown immediately after the gravity of his influence upon his little sister registers with him when, on his communication of his plan to leave home for good, she comes to him with her bag packed, to accompany him on his journey away from home. In the same way, this is true of Mato, as well as of the young boy Bhagirath in another of Mahasweta Devi's works, the play "Bayan" (2002).

It is when he sees his father talking to the bean (witch) that Bhagirathi becomes unafraid and suspicious of the whole 'been' theory: "Is a been a human being then?" ("Bayan" 27). In *The Armenian Champa Tree*, Mato is an extension of his mother and brother. From them, Mato has learnt to stand up for what he deems worthy and so, independent of any support from his people, Mato musters the courage to enter the forest in the middle of the night, and to fight for what is dear and important to him, Arjun.

Significantly, Mato's escape is an act of resistance. In the course of the two nights' long chase, Mato meets people and defies the odds with a stoicism and maturity that belies his age, as he is pitted against the pettiness of characters such as the phony Raven Malakal. It is in Raven that Devi creates a clever embodiment of the prototype bully. Dreaded as a mischief monger and cheat among neighbours, he is the stagy muscle man who perceives and responds to events (funerals, ceremonies, and folk theatre) as opportunities of self-promotion, trading in rumour, emotion and opinion whenever it feeds his belly or ego. Though at first dismissive about the goat-flood theory as rustic humbug, he is soon at the helm of the chase, in quest of the promised "gold mohur" (gold coin). The text translates with comic irony the contrast in the rivals; the singular, famished Mato swimming the cold canal and hiding in the forest at night juxtaposed against the collective personalities of his pursuers, including the superficial Raven, who are wary of entering the canal or the forest, their imagination vivid with notions of ghosts and banshees. They consider the situation at hand an urgent one which threatens their future but not so pressing as to induce them to enter the forest and jeopardize their physical present. They prioritize and personalize their fears, yet Mato cares for nothing other than bringing Arjun to safety.

"Arjun was going to be butchered for a puja. And hats off to Mother Kali also. Why did she have to mention Arjun in the dream?" (Devi, *The Armenian* 23). Mato finds the mendicant's pronouncement bizarre and is incredulous of his people's acceptance of it. Moreover, he is appalled by the deity's involvement in this absurdity. Children do not easily discern deceit, but they come to possess the survival instinct concomitant with their knowledge of the self. Trying to rationalize or refute the charge levelled upon his pet does not occur as an option to Mato. However, the need for urgent escape is immediately clear to him. With the clock ticking against him he wastes no time and slips away on the same night, after everyone else is asleep, seeking to reach the Armenian Church. Two things are noteworthy here: firstly, that the objective is a church and not a temple. Mato must escape his people and his gods, those he has always known, the people who recognize him but know nothing of him or his quandary. In a way he is running to reach home, a place where he will be accepted, with no questions asked. This pursuit of understanding brings us to the second point, which is: this is not a church of the British. The Armenian context is repeatedly specified and emphasized and is hence significant. What effective promise does the Armenian hold for Mato? Fleeing one set of skewed rationale, he identifies the Church compound as the singularly most effective alternative to the mass frenzy that threatens him. Had it been the church of the rulers, perhaps the landlord's influence would have extracted

Arjun from there, or denied him entry in the first place, but not so with the Armenian. This is not to say that the nine-year-old Mato weighed the benefits of going for the Armenian church as opposed to any other, but rather that it came to him spontaneously as the only hope, implying that the Armenian was pre-internalized in him as non-threatening. Armenians have been a consistent and benign presence in India since early Mughal times, peacefully doing their trade, remaining distant in the power games of the region. Though dwindling in numbers, they have been firmly located in Kerala and Kolkata and, despite the changing political scenarios, have continued to enjoy patronage and various privileges. Mato must flee the malicious beliefs of his people and take refuge in the beneficent beliefs of the “other”; the Armenian church compound therefore is the middle ground, the kindly foreign isle surrounded by the native land, just as the champa tree in the compound is the native in foreign territory. Blossoming in the Armenian garden, the tree is the local made exotic.

That the author significantly begins and ends the story of Mato with a description of the seeming images of a child and priest formed on wintry evenings by the foggy silhouette of the Armenian champa tree is not without import. The existence of Mato, the ordinary boy of extraordinary resilience, is juxtaposed with the blossoming champa tree in the corner of the churchyard. The propinquity and similarity of their situations create a connection between them and the latter, in its innocent overwhelming fragrance, comes to symbolize the tiny boy of unusual courage whose compassion became a lore. Both the tree and the courage of the boy lost beneath it become a peripheral yet cherished local presence. The story is one of hope, and the endurance of Mato’s story as legend is testimony to the people’s fascination with the boy’s undaunted character. It is a mark of what a determined soul can achieve against high odds. Although the author is at pains to suggest the story’s factual origin, if one were to take it for a mere folk fantasy, its continued currency would yet testify to the resilience and hope in the mindscape of its indigenous bearers.

Mato shows great spiritual rigour despite being surrounded by an intellectually timid populace. Though fatal for him, in a way, his journey is empowering. On one hand it transforms his image - his people come to appreciate his fearlessness and resolve, while on the other they come to grasp the stupidity of the chase. By the time he reaches the Church boundary, Chibbilas is cheering for his younger brother’s clever running. While his brother is proud of Mato’s agility and of how he ducks and evades the people coming at him from different directions, it is Mato’s friend, Ushas, who is crying with grief over Mato’s collapsing person, miserable at having been a participant in the folly that compelled Mato to take the fatal flight.

Devi’s problem-solution structuring of Mato’s story plays a distinctively crucial part in the reader’s reception and connection with the chief idea of the story. The rhetorical quizzing manner of the narrative resists the coagulation of existent stereotypes, probing one to re-examine and to glean answers forthcoming from within one’s own psyche, as the following examples suggest: “After all you can’t fool around with Mother Goddess Manasa, can you?” (Devi, *The Armenian* 41), “Did Raven Malakal and his fellow

villagers give up and go back?” (Devi, *The Armenian* 39), “How cold it was! How many stars were blossoming in the water!” (Devi, *The Armenian* 38). The narrative directly addresses the child in every reader and its conversational tenor further enhances this involvement. Oscillating between carnivals bustle and chilling dread, between Mato, the carefree Jabra (folk-theatre)-loving child and Mato, the careworn guardian of a dearly loved pet, it attempts to put the reader alongside Mato’s bare feet and his shivering, wet, starved frame, alone, in the darkness, to know his limitations, choices, and draining strength. His absolute aloneness is critically amplified when juxtaposed with the almost euphoric mob frenzy that trails him.

Several narratives have attempted to comment upon the unquestioned deference towards traditions and myths that societies create and adhere to, so much so that it comes to define their culture and thereby their identity. To cite another American text, Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” (1949) is a noteworthy example to this effect and provides an interesting analogy to Devi’s depiction of social mores, peer pressure, and enslavement to tradition. Beginning in the narration of an apparently busy fete, it gradually develops a sinister aspect that culminates in the killing of a woman chosen for murder through a lottery from among the town’s people. The story is intensely shocking, and particularly disturbing is the involvement of young children in the democide, which lays focus on the early systemic indoctrination of hostility and sadism as acceptable in the name of servitude to tradition. While families are seen to cling close together all through the process of the lottery, it concludes in the cornering, for mortal extermination, of a singular individual forsaken by her children and husband alike, who are, instead, obliged to stone her together with the rest of the public, in keeping with the tradition.

The story portends a dystopian possibility owing to the sanctification of tradition as absolute. While this could be one reality, more authentic still is the overwhelming fear of change that has rapidly entered the lives of the Adivasi’s (aboriginal tribal peoples of India) and indigenous under-classes around the world. In response, tribes and societies seek to preserve their unique social mores, and the associated superstitious beliefs. The more unalloyed a tribe is, the more resistant it is to change. The idea of a change in attitude to those traditional, and at times mythological, elements which are held as sacred is invariably posited as blasphemous in tribal culture. Any resistance to change which emanates from the unquestioning acceptance of the majority/power body view is a self-sabotaging weakness in an individual/community especially when it compromises basic human rights and can prove to be a regressive stance in an increasingly futuristic world that pushes such practitioners behind by centuries and relegates them to the Dark Ages. To circumvent reasonable and logical behavior through a continued adherence to regressive beliefs, such as witch-hunting, with the sole view of retaining a distinctive – albeit decadent – practice is akin to “pulling wool over the eyes” in order to avoid uncomfortable truths. The pivotal role the author of *The Armenian Champa Tree* ascribes to children and to formative psychology hints at a possible counter response to this

rampant propaganda, and this is through the masses nurturing a compassionate mindset that is perceptive, curious and, in these qualities, thereby resistant to manipulation.

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