

# Between Silence and Survival: Postcolonial Trauma, Arrested Selfhood, and Tribal Lives in South India

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**Abstract**—The article critically examines the postcolonial reconfiguration of self, subjectivity, and identity through the theoretical lens of subaltern studies and the genre of the Bildungsroman, with particular emphasis on Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. It interrogates the disjunction between the rhetoric of universal rights and their partial, often compromised, implementation in postcolonial societies marked by historical domination, gender inequity, and ideological violence. Drawing on key postcolonial, Marxist, poststructuralist, and feminist thinkers such as Spivak, Fanon, Bhabha, Said, Althusser, and Slaughter, the study argues that colonial histories produce an arrested and fragmented self, necessitating alternative narrative forms to articulate subjectivity. The paper situates the postcolonial Bildungsroman as a genre of survival rather than harmonious development, foregrounding silence, mimicry, hybridity, and resistance as central modes of becoming. Through a close reading of Kambili’s journey in *Purple Hibiscus*, the study demonstrates how enforced silence evolves into reflective agency within a hostile patriarchal and postcolonial environment. Ultimately, the paper contends that postcolonial female Bildung redefines formation as an ongoing process of negotiation and self-reclamation, transforming marginality into a space of critical consciousness and creative possibility.

**Index Terms**—Postcolonialism, Subalternity, Female Bildungsroman, Silence and Voice.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Globally, “Indian culture” is often romanticized and stereotyped as a homogeneous entity characterized by overprotective parents, large and close-knit families, deeply entrenched religious practices, ancient customs, elaborate jewellery, intricately designed clothing, and a pervasive sense of spirituality (Satpathy 8). Despite processes of modernization,

migration, and global exposure, many Indians continue to internalize and practice cultural values transmitted across generations. This intergenerational transmission of culture is particularly visible among tribal clans and indigenous communities, though it may be argued that contemporary castes and social groups in India also exhibit tribal characteristics in terms of shared customs, beliefs, and collective identity.

The Dictionary of Anthropology defines a tribe as a social group typically associated with a specific geographical territory, a shared dialect, cultural homogeneity, and a unifying social organization. Such groups are often bound together by common religious practices, customs, and cultural traditions. While this definition aligns contextually with several modern Indian communities, the term “tribe” in contemporary India is largely reserved for Scheduled Tribes—groups perceived as having remained outside the processes of modernity and insufficiently assimilated into mainstream culture. Nevertheless, the Eurocentric construction of “Indian culture” continues to influence both tribal and non-tribal populations, albeit to varying degrees.

The lived realities of tribal communities in their natural habitats differ significantly from those of urban populations. While rural-to-urban migration and infrastructural development have improved the quality of life for millions, tribal populations often remain marginalized. Access to basic amenities, healthcare, and education is frequently limited, either due to the reluctance of tribal communities to engage with state mechanisms or because of exploitative intermediaries who deprive them of their rightful entitlements. Communities that were historically self-sufficient for centuries now require external assistance as a result of

land encroachment, ecological degradation, and displacement. Consequently, tribal life in India is often marked by poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, and inadequate healthcare (Executive Summary – Tribal Health Report, India).

This paper undertakes a focused literary analysis of the Kurumba and Irula tribes of Tamil Nadu and the Mala Arayan tribe of Kerala. These mountain-dwelling communities are geographically isolated due to difficult terrain and limited access to mainstream spaces. Despite being separated by considerable distances, these tribes exhibit shared cultural practices, social structures, and lived experiences that resonate with tribal communities across India. The study seeks to identify common patterns of trauma experienced by these communities and to foreground their struggles within the framework of a postcolonial nation.

Trauma is generally understood as an individual's psychological or emotional response to distressing events (Keels). When violence and victimization remain unaddressed, trauma is often transmitted across generations, resulting in transgenerational or intergenerational trauma. This phenomenon is particularly evident among marginalized and colonized populations worldwide. Rooted in Freudian psychoanalysis, trauma theory has become central to postcolonial literary studies, where psychological rupture, memory, and historical violence intersect. As Mambrol (2020) observes, "psychological trauma, its representation in language, and the role of memory in shaping individual and cultural identities are the central concerns that define the field of trauma studies."

The term "postcolonialism" refers to the socio-political, cultural, and psychological aftermath of colonial and imperial domination (Iverson). Postcolonial literature, often written in the language of the colonizer, exposes the dehumanising treatment of colonized peoples and interrogates enduring power structures. Tribal literature can be situated within this framework due to the phenomenon of internal colonization; wherein indigenous communities are marginalized by dominant groups within their own nation. Many tribes were first "discovered" and classified by European explorers, reinforcing hierarchies of power and knowledge. However, colonial domination also manifests internally, as tribal communities continue to face subjugation by socially

and economically dominant groups within their own regions.

The trauma experienced by tribal communities remains significantly underrepresented in literary discourse. Only a limited number of tribes find representation through authors who have acquired linguistic proficiency and access to platforms of expression. Consequently, fictional narratives alone are insufficient for comprehensively understanding tribal experiences. Non-fictional accounts, ethnographic studies, and documentary evidence thus become crucial for analyzing tribal life, particularly in under-researched regions such as the Nilgiris. Given that trauma is experienced and processed differently across communities, it cannot be universally defined or uniformly applied. A comparative analysis of tribal histories and contemporary conditions offers deeper insight into their evolving social realities.

The Nilgiri mountain range, now celebrated as a popular hill resort, was explored in the early nineteenth century, with road access established in 1821 (History – The Nilgiris District, Tamil Nadu). For British colonizers, the region represented a climatic refuge from the plains. However, this "discovery" overlooked the presence of indigenous inhabitants who had lived in harmony with the land for generations. As Bird (1987) notes, "until British colonization, starting in 1823, the tribal population of the Nilgiris were by and large cut off from the Hindu India of the plains."

Colonial records reveal a deeply prejudiced perception of these communities. Major William Ross King's account, "The Aboriginal Tribes of the Nilgiris Hills," provides detailed descriptions of the Todas, Kotas, Irulas, Kurumbas, Niadis, Brinjarries, and Badagas, often employing language ranging from patronizing to overtly contemptuous. Similarly, J. A. Dubois characterizes tribal communities as "less intelligent even than the natives of Africa" (1897, 76). Despite the passage of over a century and a half, many aspects of tribal life—housing, clothing, adornment, and social status—remain largely unchanged. While technological progress has transformed much of the world, its impact on the tribes of the Nilgiris has been minimal. Instead, displacement and cultural erosion have inflicted lasting damage.

Contemporary literature, documentaries, interviews, and the absence of extensive first-hand tribal narratives attest to the persistence of colonial trauma

and socio-economic stagnation. The continuity of these conditions underscores the urgency of critically examining tribal experiences within postcolonial discourse and recognizing the enduring consequences of both external and internal colonization.

## II. TRIBAL COMMUNITIES AND POSTCOLONIAL TRAUMA: KURUMBA, IRULA, AND MALA ARAYAN EXPERIENCES

### The Kurumba Tribe: Marginalization, Healing, and Arrested Aspirations

The Kurumba tribe, believed to share historical links with the Pallava dynasty (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 1998), inhabits the remote regions of the Nilgiri mountain range in Tamil Nadu. Their settlements are geographically isolated and accessible only through arduous journeys along mountainous paths. Colonial ethnographic accounts often sought to identify tribes through physical features, and Major William Ross King describes the Kurumbas as possessing “bleared eyes, a rather wide mouth, and often projecting teeth” (King 46), a depiction that reflects the racialised gaze of colonial anthropology rather than objective observation.

Traditionally, the Kurumbas practiced hunting and gathering and did not engage in settled agriculture. Like many indigenous communities, they possess a distinct religious system comprising local deities, rituals, and ceremonial practices that govern all significant life events. However, these very customs have often been misinterpreted by neighboring communities, leading to the Kurumbas being viewed with suspicion and fear. Accusations of sorcery and witchcraft have historically contributed to their marginalization, despite the tribe’s well-documented expertise in medicine and healing. Kurumba healers are frequently consulted by neighboring tribes such as the Kota, Irula, and Toda, as well as by the upper-caste Badaga community, for their extensive knowledge of medicinal plants and traditional cures.

The contemporary life of the Kurumba tribe is vividly portrayed in Nidhi Dugar Kundalia’s short story “The Kurumbas of the Nilgiris,” included in *White as Milk and Rice: Stories of India’s Isolated Tribes*. Set in Coonoor, the narrative centers on Mani, a young Kurumba boy living with his father and stepmother in a mud hut. Mani yearns for the life enjoyed by the

Badagas, a socially and economically dominant community characterised by education, material comfort, and social privilege. The disparity between the two communities is stark, and Mani’s desire reflects the internalization of inferiority produced by structural inequality.

Mani’s alienation is compounded by everyday humiliation. He is mocked by Badaga schoolchildren and labelled a sorcerer, echoing colonial-era stereotypes that portrayed the Kurumbas as mysterious and dangerous. King’s observation that “strange and mysterious stories” circulated about tribes dwelling in “unhealthy jungles” (King 44) demonstrates the historical roots of such prejudice. Mani’s father, once a respected healer, succumbs to alcoholism, neglecting ritual obligations and professional responsibilities. His failure to perform healing practices correctly—such as offering medicine to the deity Hiriadeva before administering it—symbolizes the erosion of cultural authority under postcolonial pressures (Kundalia 83). Denied equitable access to education and subjected to discrimination in the classroom, Mani is seated separately from Badaga children, reinforcing caste- and tribe-based segregation. His traditional knowledge of forests, medicinal plants, and healing holds little value in a postcolonial economy that prioritizes salaried employment. As his mother suggests, material aspirations are reduced to modest desires such as owning a bicycle or eating chicken (Kundalia 81). Mani’s trauma stems from the realization that his birth into the Kurumba tribe predetermines his social and economic limitations. His character becomes emblematic of Kurumba youth whose development is stunted by systemic deprivation and chronic exposure to marginalization. As Keels notes, prolonged exposure to trauma combined with limited coping mechanisms profoundly affects children growing up in impoverished environments (68).

### The Irula Tribe: Development, Displacement, and Cultural Loss

The Irula tribe comprises several communities scattered across the Nilgiri hills of Tamil Nadu. Traditionally hunters and gatherers, the Irulas were particularly renowned for snake-catching and venom extraction. However, the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972 prohibited such practices, forcing the community to seek alternative livelihoods. Many Irulas became daily wage laborers on tea

plantations owned by upper-caste groups or operated by the state.

With governmental assistance, Irula communities transitioned from traditional dwellings to brick-and-cement houses and gradually adapted to a monetary economy. Despite persistent poverty, these changes contributed to modest economic advancement. The Irulas also played a crucial role in venom collection for the production of antivenom, indicating their continued relevance within modern medical frameworks. Over the past century, access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities has contributed to visible progress within the community.

Superficially, the Irulas may appear to have escaped the trauma associated with marginalization. However, the deeper trauma lies in the loss of ancestral land, cultural erosion, and enforced assimilation—central consequences of postcolonial modernity. Many indigenous practices were branded as primitive or uncivilized and were abandoned either through colonial intervention or voluntary conversion to dominant religions such as Hinduism and Christianity in pursuit of social mobility.

Government-sponsored tea plantations resulted in the alienation of Irula land, confining the community to smaller settlements. Despite these losses, the Irulas demonstrated adaptability. As Dr Jakka Parthasarathy observes, urbanization introduced a market economy that encouraged Irula men and women to explore new employment opportunities (44). Nevertheless, systemic issues persist, including alcoholism, debt, caste discrimination, and restricted access to resources.

Irula women face compounded marginalization. Parthasarathy notes that their reserved behavior and reluctance to engage with outsiders stem from a deep-seated sense of inferiority and vulnerability to exploitation (61). Exploitation thus emerges as a recurring source of trauma, reinforcing psychological distress and perpetuating cycles of dependency across generations.

The Mala Arayan Tribe: Conversion, Dispossession, and Gendered Trauma

The Mala Arayan tribe of Kerala's Idukki district occupies a distinctive position in tribal historiography due to its early engagement with Christian missionaries. Historically Hindu and custodians of the

Sabarimala shrine, the Mala Arayans lost their land and religious authority not to European colonizers but to the Travancore monarchy in the eighteenth century. With this dispossession, the tribe lost both territory and spiritual sovereignty.

Subsequent conversion to Christianity facilitated closer ties with missionary institutions, which benefitted economically from tea plantations in Kottayam and Idukki cultivated by Mala Arayan labour. Despite possessing fertile land suitable for coffee and tea cultivation, the tribe refrained from commercial exploitation, adhering instead to subsistence practices. Over time, however, they were gradually dispossessed by upper-caste interests and state authorities.

Narayan's novel *Kocharethi*, set in the early twentieth century Western Ghats, offers a nuanced portrayal of Mala Arayan life. Recognised as Kerala's first tribal novelist, Narayan documents the lived experiences of the Adivasi community through the character of Kunjipennu. Bound by tribal custom to marry her uncle's son, Kunjipennu challenges tradition by choosing her own partner, marking an assertion of agency within a rigid cultural framework.

Her trauma intensifies following a forest fire that destroys her home and claims her child's life. Alcoholism further accelerates the community's decline; a phenomenon often associated with colonial disruption. Kunjipennu's husband, Kochuraman, succumbs to addiction, reflecting a pattern prevalent across tribal societies. The Mala Arayan women's suffering is compounded by land loss, police exploitation, and economic insecurity.

Kunjipennu's daughter Parvati embodies a new form of trauma shaped by education and mobility. Though she secures employment in Kochi, Parvati distances herself from her tribal identity, perceiving it as a social burden. Her marriage into urban society signifies both upward mobility and cultural alienation. When Kochuraman's illness necessitates medical intervention, the elderly couple flee the hospital, unable to comprehend or trust modern healthcare systems. Narayan thus highlights the community's inability to fully negotiate the transition to postcolonial modernity.

The trauma faced by the Mala Arayans remains unresolved, caught between tradition and transformation. Diseases engendered by colonial and postcolonial disruption can only be addressed through

engagement with modern systems that tribal communities often find alienating. This tension underscores the incomplete assimilation of tribal societies into postcolonial frameworks, leaving them suspended between past and present.

### III. CONCLUSION

The comparative examination of the Kurumba, Irula, and Mala Arayan tribes reveals that postcolonial trauma within indigenous communities is neither incidental nor confined to the colonial past; rather, it is an ongoing condition shaped by historical dispossession, cultural delegitimization, and structural marginalization. Despite regional, cultural, and historical differences, these communities share common experiences of alienation, arrested self-development, and fractured identity formation within a nation-state that continues to privilege dominant social groups. Colonial epistemologies, far from being dismantled, persist through internal hierarchies of caste, class, and ethnicity, producing what may be termed a continuum of coloniality in post-independence India.

Literary narratives emerge as powerful sites for articulating these suppressed histories and psychic wounds. Characters such as Mani in Kundalia's portrayal of the Kurumbas and Kunjipennu in Narayan's Kocharethi embody the intimate costs of systemic injustice—costs borne by bodies, minds, and communities. Children internalize inferiority through educational exclusion, while women experience gendered trauma intensified by land loss, alcoholism, and cultural transition. These narratives demonstrate that trauma is not only experienced individually but is transmitted intergenerationally, shaping aspirations, relationships, and worldviews.

At the same time, the trajectories of the Irula community complicate any singular narrative of victimhood. Their partial economic advancement and engagement with modern institutions illustrate both adaptability and loss. Development, while materially beneficial in certain respects, often entails cultural erasure and the delegitimization of indigenous knowledge systems. The transition from self-sufficient ecological lifestyles to wage labor and market dependency underscores the paradox of postcolonial progress: inclusion achieved at the cost of autonomy.

The Mala Arayan experience further exposes the ambiguities of conversion, education, and urban mobility. While these pathways offer opportunities for social advancement, they also engender cultural estrangement and identity conflict. The inability of older generations to negotiate modern healthcare or bureaucratic systems symbolizes a deeper structural failure—one in which the postcolonial state demands assimilation without adequately addressing historical injustice or cultural difference.

This study ultimately argues that addressing tribal trauma requires more than welfare measures or symbolic inclusion. It necessitates a reimagining of postcolonial justice that centers indigenous voices, acknowledges historical wrongs, and protects cultural sovereignty. Without such interventions, tribal communities will remain suspended between tradition and modernity, bearing the unresolved burdens of a colonial past within a postcolonial present.

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