

THE DAWN JOURNAL

Reforming Beliefs



PORTRAYAL OF TRIBAL LIFE IN HERMAN MELVILLE'S TYPEE

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Herman Melville is one of the greatest novelists in American Literature. He has written several novels like *Typee, Omoo, Mardi, Redburn, White-Jacket and Moby Dick* of which *Typee* is known as *Typee: A peep at Polynesian Life, during a four months' residence in a Valley of the Marquesas* is the first novel. It reflects his personal experiences in the South Seas. It was published in the year 1846. Melville's quest for a unique paradise, another Garden of Eden, away from his civilized society is obvious in *Typee*. Simultaneously, the novel reflects the tribal life of Typee Valley. It is indeed a true account of Herman Melville's visit to the valley, the experience and observation at this tribal valley had resulted in bringing out his maiden novel, *Typee*. This paper makes an attempt to study the tribal life of the Typees, their mores and customs, their government and their religion, their marriage practices and their food habits, their rituals and their taboos. The novel reflects the tribal civilization and culture of the typees. It is indeed one of the excellent narrations of Herman Melville's voyages. Newton Arwin is direct in his remark,

Typee and *Omoo* have an undertone of serious meaning. Taken together, they tell the story of a quest or pilgrimage---a pilgrimage not, certainly, "from this world to that which is to come", but from the world of enlightened rationality, technical progress, and cultural complexity." (Arwin, 87)

Great works or the like that are worthy of a larger reading public and a high degree of appreciation and admiration have never seemed to evoke an immediate response soon after they come out of the publishing house. *Typee* or even *Moby Dick* were no exceptions to this. But once accepted, despite their belated reception, they evoke a power that turns them classics. This simple reality is expressed by certain critics thus,

'*Typee* was at once recognized for the merits which have made it a classic...Having survived the neglect of his contemporaries and the elaborate attentions of the recent critics, he (Melville) emerges secure in the power and influence of *Typee*, *Moby Dick* and a number of poems.' (Perkins, 1507 – 8)



Having discussed the merits of the work of art, it is felt imperative, at this point to turn to the chosen aspect of the paper – tribal life of the Typees. In the islands of Marquesas, two young sea men Tom and Toby walk into an island valley and come in the way of the Typees supposed to be one of two tribes noted for its savagery. But fortunately the young men find the Typees considerably amicable and friendly. Owing to unforeseen circumstances, these two get separated when Tommy is left alone among the Typees without knowing the whereabouts of his companion Toby. Anyway, he is getting along with the natives in self-satisfying manner. As days pass on, he develops a fear, the fear of cannibalism said to be practiced by the tribes and decides to escape from them. His escape is not an easy one. He is followed by the tribe. Fortunately the boat of an Australian whaling ship comes for his rescue and he escapes alive from that island of cannibals.

The tribes of Typees have strange customs and practices. Tattoos of varied designs and queer pieces of cloth made of 'tappa' (obtained from the slender fibrous substance of the so called cloth tree, after a quenching and drying process) seem to be another skin of all these tribes. Tattooed tribes and their chiefs are seen even before these two young men reach the valley. When they arrive at the island of Nukuheva, in Tior, the patriarch-sovereign of the tribe and the French admiral are seen side by side. The pictorial display of royal introduction of both the tribal chief and the civilized one goes as,

The admiral came forward with head uncovered and extended hand, while the old king saluted him by a stately flourish of his weapon. The next moment, they stood side by side, these two extremes of the social scale,--the polished, splendid Frenchmen, and the poor tattooed savage. (T. 25)

Soon after reaching the Typee valley, the two are surrounded by the harmless tribes of the area. Here too, they can have a closer look of tattooed men. The narrator observes, 'It was evening, and by the dim light we could just discern the savage countenances around us, gleaming with wild curiosity and wonder; the naked forms and tattooed limbs of brawny warriors...' The most typical look or the appearance of a tribal chief is zoomed out when the seemingly warlike personage, Mehevi a noble soul enters the dwelling place the two young men,



His aspect was imposing. The splendid long drooping tail-feathers of the tropical bird, thickly interspersed with the gaudy plumage of the cock, were disposed in an immense upright semicircle upon his head,....The loins of the warrior were girt about with heavy folds of a dark-coloured tappa, hanging before and behind in clusters of braided tassels, with anklets and bracelets of curling human hair completed his unique costume....the most remarkable in the appearance of this splendid islander was the elaborate tattooing displayed on every noble limb. All imaginable lines, curves and figures were delineated over his whole body, and in their grotesque variety and infinite profusion. (T. 53)

The use of 'tappa' is found everywhere and every time be it an occasion of sadness or merrymaking or festivity. The description of tappa and garments made of it is available in the novel from the young men's very meeting of the tribes of this referred region. When the old quack sort of fellow gets in to give a herbal cure to the aching leg of the narrator, he is describes to have 'a flowing robe of tappa, knotted over the shoulder, hung loosely round his stooping form'. Kory-Kory, the caring and kind tribe appointed to take care of the narrator, also has an exterior that's mostly covered with tattooing which can be seen in,

Kory-Kory, with a view of improving the handiwork of nature and prompted by a desire, had seen fit to embellish his face with three broad longitudinal stripes of tattooing, which like those country roads that go straight forward in defiance of all obstacles, crossed his nasal organ, descended into the hollow of his eyes and even skirted the borders of his mouth. (T. 56)

With regard to the women, tattooing has not gained greater importance. But they delight in beautifying themselves with fanciful articles of jewellery. Fresh flowers have a great say in their make-up and decoration of their own person. It is said,

They wore necklaces of small carnation flowers, strung like rubies upon a fibre of tappa,...showing in front the delicate petals folded together in a beautiful sphere...indeed, the maidens of the island were passionately fond of



flowers, and never wearied of decorating; a lovely trait in their character. (T. 59)

In the very next chapter, these two young men are taken to a strange place conducted by Kory-Kory and Mehevi that exposes a good deal of the tribal taboo groves, the hoolah hoolah ground and their temple known as 'Ti'. The Taboo groves of the valley form

the scene of many a prolonged feast, the frightful genius of pagan worship seemed to brood in silence over the place, breathing its spell upon every object around...half screened from sight by masses of overhanging foliage, rose the idolatrous altars of the savages, built of enormous blocks of black and polished stone, placed one upon another, without cement, to the height of twelve or fifteen feet, and surmounted by a rustic open temple enclosed with a low picket of canes. (T. 61)

In this vicinity is the hoolah hoolah ground considered to be their holiest of spots that carries the strictest taboo that no female of their tribes should be seen in around the premises. Any female who trespasses this knowingly or unknowingly has to face dare consequences, the punitive measures leading even to death. The area adjoining this strange temple is occupied by the habitation of the priest and religious attendants of the taboo groves.

On another occasion, their habit of worshiping a strange god, named Artua is described when the soldier priest performs the most unusual rituals having the baby god in his hand. A funny picture of this is depicted, as he bears the Moa Artua in his arms, and carries in one had a small trough, hollowed out in the likeness of a canoe. 'The priest come along dandling his charge as if it were a lachrymose infant he was endeavoring to put into a good humour...But the babygod is deaf or dumb, perhaps both, for never a word does, he utter.' These were the religious practices or rituals that these Typee tribes had for a long time. The novel *Typee* is, of course, a good testimony of fine narrative. A good narrative that abounds in such strange rituals do account for its myth. A professor cum scholarly critic observes,

'The substantive or essential characteristics include its (pertaining to myth) narrative aspect, its sacred origin, its etiological character, its relation to



rituals, its communitarian and normative dimensions, its pre-historical and pre-logical nature and its fabulous character '(Dorairaj, 65)

Melville, using Tom as his mouth piece, comments on the religious system of the tribes thus, 'In truth, I regard the Typees as a back-slidden generation. They are sunk in religious sloth, and require a spiritual revival...the temples themselves need rethatching...the tattooed clergy are altogether too light hearted and lazy...and their flocks are going astray'

With regard to their food habits, it can be observed that coconuts and bread-fruits thereof formed the major part of their meal, be it breakfast, lunch and dinner. The narrator is very happy to state the same in,

I ate poee-poee, from a trencher which was devoted exclusively for my own use, mixed with the milky meat of ripe cocoanut. A section of a roasted bread-fruit, a small cake of 'Amar', or mess of 'Cokoo', two or three bananas, or a mammee-apple; an annuee, or some other agreeable and nutritious fruit served from day to day to diversify the meal, which as finished by tossing off the liquid contents of a young cocoanut or two. (T. 94)

Kory-Kory's mother is said to be an expert cook in their tribe, 'She was profoundly skilled in the mysteries of preparing, 'amar', 'poee-poee' and 'koo-koo' with other substantial matter.' The sociable tribes sat around during repast and made conversation promoting digestion. They have a habit of smoking after the meal. It will never be a prolonged smoke, but only in a whiff or two at longer intervals—a kind of communal smoking. At times, these tribes take 'arwa' a boozy drink made at their own home. Another interesting fact is, these tribes don't know the art of producing salt. It is a priceless commodity. Melville opines that with a bushel of common salt, all the real estate in the Typee valley could be purchased.

With regard to their custom of marriage, it could be observed that Typee tribes practice an extraordinary system of polygamy—a married woman had several husbands instead of a man having several wives, thanks to exceeding number of male population.

The girls are wooed and won at a tender age, no formal engagement is contracted...a (right suitor takes the girl at a later stage)...there will only be



rare cases of infidelity. No man has more than one wife, and no wife of mature years has less than two husbands ...a Typee wife lives on very pleasant and sociable terms with her husband. On the whole, wedlock, as known among these Typees, seems to be a more distinct and enduring nature than is usually the case with barbarous people. (T. 117)

In analyzing the social as well as governmental system of the Typees, it is pointed out theirs is indeed an ideal at the same time little organised system that throws its prime concern for people and their welfare. But for the mysterious taboo, their relationship with their chiefs is mild in the extreme and upheld a good as well as standard conduct. Tom is right in his comment:

During the time I lived among the Typees, no one was ever put upon his trial for any offence against the public. To all appearance, there were no courts of law or equity. There was no municipal police for the purpose of apprehending vagrants and disorderly characters. In short, there were no legal provisions whatever for the well-being and conservation of society...In the darkest nights they slept securely, with all their worldly wealth around them, in houses the doors of which were never fastened. The disquieting ideas of theft or assassination never disturbed them. (T. 121)

The concepts of civilization or culture, could be, at times, misleading and may turn the table in the opposite direction. Hence, a tribal civilization, though strange and may not be compatible or analogous to the so called modern western civilization. Based on this proposition, even the strange culture of the Typee tribes could be interpreted in terms of its being well civilized or rightly civilized. The following critical remark justifies this surmise,

'The Typees did not have our western civilization of time, of the value of memory and anticipation of the future...Melville could not, of course pull up his own roots in western civilization; he had to escape from the Typees and come home. But he came home a lifelong questioner, and *Typee* brought to American literature a perspective on civilized life we had not seen before.' (Holt, 272 – 73)



The entire novel turns out to be a rich store-house of the strange, unusual, queer and extraordinary life of the Typee tribe. To some extent, it proves to be a utopian state too, which is rather unimaginable in our so called modern and civilized society. Thus, an attempt has been made here to analyse Melville's portrayal of tribal life of Typees looking at certain aspects of the civilization and culture of Typee tribes as naturally as possible. With regard to the cultural and social aspects of tribal life, a noted critic passes his judgment on critical insight of Melville by saying,

'Melville's critical sights are set in every direction, but they are especially trained on civilization and its appalling inroads in a primitive culture. As always when Melville adapted a particular tradition to his artistic needs, he transcended the limitations of the borrowed form and wrote as he pleased' (Miller, 19)

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