

**CITIZEN OF NOWHERE IN SEARCH OF HIS ROOTS, A STUDY OF  
SAROS COWASJEE'S 'GOODBYE TO ELSA' AND  
'SUFFER LITTLE CHILDREN'**

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**Abstract**

The present paper aims to bring out the predicament of Tristan Elliot, an exile and the protagonist of Goodbye to Elsa and Suffer Little Children, Saros Cowasjee's two novels. 'Goodbye to Elsa and Suffer Little Children' are tales of an individual's struggle to come to terms with society and the tragic aftermath of his failure and eventual loneliness and alienation. Tristan Elliot is the product of a mixed marriage. This fact straightaway establishes his rootlessness. He is the representative of a highly marginalized community. The present novels are set fully in Saskatchewan, Canada. Apart from Tristan, all other characters are Canadian. Through the delineation of Tristan, the novels deal with serious problems like alienation, loneliness and rootlessness.

The novels, through the depiction of the protagonist Tristan's repeated and continuous search for love and attempts to love and be loved by somebody resulting in utter failure, indicate his marginalized condition and rootlessness.

**Keywords:** alienation, rootlessness, marginalized, representative, satire.

Goodbye to Elsa and Suffer Little Children are the two most popular novels of Saros Dara Cowasjee, a Novelist, short story writer, editor and critic. In his first novel Goodbye to Elsa, Saros Cowasjee delineates the predicament of an Anglo-Indian exile. It is a tale of an individual's struggle to come to terms with society and the tragic aftermath of his failure and resultant loneliness and alienation. Tristan Elliott, the central figure of the novel is the product of a mixed marriage. This fact straightaway establishes his rootlessness. Tristan is the representative of a highly marginalized community and serves as the mouthpiece of the agonized and alienated community.

Tristan is an Anglo-Indian. He has a number of harsh experiences in India, England and Canada. He fails to get love in India and goes to England for higher studies, and later to Canada

for a job. In all three countries, his failure to accept the social norms makes him feel lonely. At the same time he does not feel welcome or even accepted in any of these places. He searches for a meaning and a cause for commitment in life but finds none.

The central theme of the novel is Tristan's search for love, and his loneliness when in the presence of others, which is associated with his divided Anglo-Indianness. His second novel, *Suffer Little Children* (1982), a sequel to *Goodbye to Elsa*, set fully in Saskatchewan. Apart from Tristan, his Anglo-Indian hero, all other characters are Canadian. Tristan, in this novel, falls in love with Maura and comes to believe that in an era of women's liberation her year-old daughter is a Messiah whom he attempts to kidnap after his being rejected by the mother.

Tristan, as a child goes through many hardships and has a very miserable childhood as a result of his father's early death. He has a very miserable childhood. He finds his mother chasing other men 'to enliven her evenings'. As he is too young, he fails to understand the demands of the flesh and expects total love from his mother.

... I was afraid Mother might leave me and go  
away like Daddy. And then what would I do?

However age brings knowledge and he realizes the realities of life. He loses all sympathy for his mother and begins to view her with detachment. Tristan's search for love, compassion and contentment commences at this point. His journey begins on an optimistic note and he falls in love with a beautiful girl named Nellie. But his plans to marry her are torn to pieces when she loses her legs in an accident. When he comes forward to kiss her she pushes him away with her arms. Tristan realizes that Nellie's perception of love and outlook of life has undergone total transformation.

A month after Nellie loses her legs, Tristan leaves India and comes to Dublin. He meets a girl named Julie there who is a couple of years older to him and falls in love with her. But his love affair with Julie ends in a fiasco for she is a God-fearing Puritan who is forced to make a choice between Tristan and God. Julie leaves him and as a result he is engulfed by loneliness again. Dublin offers him nothing and therefore he leaves it one September morning. He arrives at his uncle's place in Leeds for further studies at the university. Uncle Kenneth and aunt Judith receive him warmly, which makes him feel at home, the way he never did in India. He hopes to be English if he is given time, for he is already 'threequarters English' to begin with. He expresses his plans to get married and settle down in England. But his uncle advises against this.

His uncle's views about the Indians disillusion him immediately and enlarge his vision of his plight. Tristan thinks that it would be difficult to explain to his uncle the fact that he isn't really an Indian but his own brother's son. He ponders:

Did they realise that the Anglo-Indian community  
Was theiration, which they discarded when they  
had no further use of it. And because we allowed  
ourselves to be used to keep their trains and their  
trams running, the Hindus suspected us of  
disloyalty. I belonged somewhere – even if I did  
not belong to them.

The basic problem of Tristan Elliott is his sense of rootlessness. Throughout the novel he searches for roots. His alienation is not confined to the geographical boundaries for he feels alien equally in India as well as in England. His alienation is more psychological than physical.

Partly as a result of his isolation, he meets Heather, a British girl and falls in love with her. She becomes Tristan's first real lover and their relationship becomes sexual too, though she

is never really faithful to him. Tristan's agony is the result of his encounter with society. He neither belongs to the East nor the West. Tristan's strange behaviour many a time puzzles Heather and she asks him why he behaves so. She suspects that there is something in his past, which makes him act in the strange way.

Though Tristan loves Heather, he is just frightened by the idea of passing his entire life with her, for except love and sex there is very little in common between them. When Tristan is facing the dilemma regarding his relationship with Heather, he meets Elsa at the British Council reading room. She is an au pair. His intimacy with Elsa leads to a moral crisis in his life. Though he is in love with Elsa, Tristan strongly feels that he belongs to Heather and to no other woman. He returns to Leeds but much to his dejection, finds Heather with a Syrian in bed. Tristan slaps Heather on her face and when she begs forgiveness, Tristan's courtship with Heather is an ultimate attempt to overcome loneliness. They come closer not out of love but sympathy. Eventually Heather goes mad. Rejected by Heather in favour of Moustafa Sadat, a Syrian, Tristan falls in love with Elsa.

Thus, the marriage between Tristan and Elsa is finalized. Meditating on Wilhelm, a dead man and Nellie, a crippled girl, Tristan is consigned to a life with a woman he never loves. Tristan's disillusionment is complete with the arrival of his son and blindness in the left eye. He realises that he has failed to establish a meaningful relationship with his wife. Elsa is very simplistic in her notion about life and the world, and it is this Tristan cannot now tolerate. He understands that knowing a person has very little to do with love. The inevitable break with Elsa leads him to near insanity. He begins to ponder suicide and plans to live away from his wife and his son. Tristan promises Elsa that he would come back in six months and leaves the house. He then contacts a friend, and rents his farm-house named Mountain View on a hillside overlooking Corwind. It is at this time that he meets a Canadian girl, Marie, who brings him back again to the world with her love. She gives him support and encouragement.

Tristan now regains his balance of mind. At this time Marie resumes her other life by going away to marry her old lover named Joe. As a result Tristan becomes desperate and in a strange mental condition, which is neither pure insanity nor sanity, he attempts to shoot Marion, Marie's twin sister thrice. Tristan's mad effort to kill Marion fails and he too is prevented from committing suicide. As the novel ends, Tristan is confined in a lunatic asylum. Thus, Goodbye to Elsa deals with the agonies of a frustrated intellectual who turns almost mad at the end of the novel. It is a tragic tale of Tristan's unsuccessful attempts to come to terms with three different societies in three different countries namely India, England and Canada. He has several bitter experiences in India, England and Canada. Frustrated in India, in love and life, he goes for higher studies to England, and later, goes to Canada for a job. In all three countries, he fails to accept the norms of the society and tries to shape his own destiny, but in this too he fails.

Besides the theme of loneliness of an individual trying to relate himself to his fellowmen, Goodbye to Elsa also deals with one of the major problems faced by the Indian nation after independence: the status of Anglo-Indians as citizens of India. This community occupies a peculiar position in Indian society with their half-British and half-Indian blood. The novel particularly deals with the problem of divided loyalty generally imputed to the Anglo-Indian community. Tristan is the son of a British father and an Anglo-Indian mother.

He thus thinks that he is three-quarters English and one-quarter Indian. But while in India he is not accepted as a pure Indian, in Britain he is completely rejected. Goodbye to Elsa and Suffer Little Children thus deal with the problem of identity of this Anglo-Indian community. Besides the theme of loneliness of an individual trying to relate himself to his fellowmen,

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