



PARAJA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF EXPLOITATION & LOSS OF CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

In Indian English Literature, much attention has not been paid to the tribal life and culture by the writers. The present paper aims to study and explore the life, loss of culture and exploitation, as it has emerged in the post independence novel *Paraja*. Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja* (1945) documents the cultural history and heritage of ethnicity, myths, legends and socio-cultural representation of the Paraja tribe of the Koraput region in Odisha, simultaneously signifying their poverty and struggle and their exploitation by the non-tribes. The novel is unique in ways because it offers a study of tribal life and culture from anthropological, sociological and ecological perspectives.

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INTRODUCTION

It is generally accepted that literature provides a true picture of people, life, culture and social milieu. Both in Drama and novel, many social and national issues, problems and cultural perspectives have been taken for discussion. Social realism dominated these genres in pre-independent period. Mulk Raj Anand, in *Untouchable*, takes discussion of the lowest strata of the society, its plight, and pathos, In *Kanthapura* Raja Rao refers to the dalit locality in the town, Arundhati Roy has taken up the Syrian community and Paravan low caste for pointed discussion of caste discrimination and atrocities inflicted on the downtrodden people. Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* provides a grim picture of oppression and exploitation of the dalit people. However, Indian English Literature has not portrayed tribal ethos as that of Dalit. In Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, tribal people, their life and culture have been passionately presented. Guha, The Vishadraj, and Sabari are the finest examples of the tribal community persons respectfully developed in the classical literature. In the Rig-Veda the aboriginal tribes are depicted as Dasas, and demons, giving them lower status in the society. However, many writers in the regional literatures have given layer space for discussion of the tribal culture.

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Their Novel and Short stories are providing many realistic pictures of folklore, legends and myths popular in the tribal societies. In Indian English Literature, much attention has not been paid to the tribal life and culture by the writers. The present paper aims to study and explore the life, culture and ethos as it has emerged in the post independence novel "*Paraja*". Born on April 20, 1914, Gopinath Mohanty, one of the greatest and celebrated prose writers of India, marked his brilliant literary presence in Odia literature for ever four decades and even today his literary dominance is a matter of reverence in Indian writings and for the scholars of literature. His literary influence was so profound in the literary arena that he was conferred the first ever Sahitya Academy award in 1955, the second highest literary award of India, after Jnanpith, for the literary credibility of his novel "Amrutara Santana". For his epic fiction, "Matimatala" Mohanty was honoured with country's highest literary award "Jnanpith" in 1974. Gopinath Mohanty got his higher education at Ravenshaw college (now Ravenshaw University) in Cuttack. He earned his M.A. degree in English Literature from Patna University in 1936. His extraordinary performance in the academies directed his choice of career making option in joining Orissa Administrative service in 1938. He served the nation with his honesty and vigour and retired in 1969. As he was posted in Koraput district as an administrator, his bent of literary creation and concern for poor people led his close contact with the tribal communities living in the area of undivided Koraput.

His minute observations of the tribes of Kondh and Paraja developed his interest in their life-styles. With this spirit of eagerness and empathy, he wanted to know their culture and customs, their languages and likings and something unusual and unseen picture of their life leading conditions. This close contact with the tribes has sparked his head and heart to be a part of them and they to be a part of his literary creations'. Major portion of his literary writings covers the life of tribal people and their social significance.

Concept Note: As he was a man of letters, in his late thirties he wrote *Paraja* and early forties his significant and award-winning work "*Amrutara Santana*". As the data of his writings found on the website in his name - www.gopinathmohanty.in proves his fifty five years span of writing vigour. In his credit he has 24 novels, 12 collections of short stories, one anthology of poems, 2 biographies in Oriya, one auto-biography, 3 plays, 2 critical essays, 5 books on tribal language and culture, 7 translations into Oriya including his Soviet Land Nehru Award winning translation of Gorky's *My Universities* in 1970; Tolstoy's *War and Peace* and Tagor's *Jogajog*, one biography in English, as well as a number of scholarly essay relating to old palm leaf manuscripts of Oriya Mahabharata. His novel *Paraja* (1945) documents the cultural history and heritage of ethnicity, myths, legends and socio-cultural representation in their festivals, songs and dances and working conditions of the Paraja tribe of the Koraput region in Odisha, simultaneously signifying their poverty and struggle and their exploitation by the non-tribes.

Context: The word 'Paraja' is an Odia local term, which seems to have derived from the Sanskrit word "Prajā", means common people who were generally ruled by the King (Raja). In Odia, it also means tenant or the "Royat". The Paraja, primitive hill tribe and hill cultivators, are among the well-known major tribes in Odisha. Paraja tribal people are innocent, careless but courageous and dedicated in their behaviour and commitment. They live natural life as it has come to their share. They worship various forms of nature and depend fully on them for their sustenance. The backward life of Paraja, their poverty, sufferings and disadvantages due to illiteracy are effectively presented in the novel. They are the victims of exploitation by the high caste people. Ethnical representations of the Paraja tribe depict the richness of their socio cultural life with an interwoven web of dependence on man and nature, signifying how they treat and are treated in their own community and by the non-tribes. Mahashweta Devi, an eminent Bengali writer remarks that tribes are the most civilized people than us and this comes true in the reading of the *Paraja*, with their values of life and society. Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, and for behaviour acquired and transmitted by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts. The essential core of culture consists of traditional ideas and especially their attached values. Festivals, songs and dances mark the Paraja's uniqueness in their socio-cultural life which are highly celebrated and observed. The Paraja's celebration of their major festivals presents their folk tales and folk dances in the accompaniment of traditional musical instrument, Celebration is an integral part of their life which is not merely for the sake of celebration but has cultural significance based on their agricultural activities and their deities. The novel is unique in ways because it offers a study of tribal life and culture from anthropological, sociological and ecological perspectives.

Analysis: The tribal characters are developed in the manner as if they are the living human beings in their several manifestations. Jili, Bili and Kajodi are the typical tribal women in their appearance and behaviour. Sukru Jani, Mandia and Tikra are very honest and sensitive tribal men. These people are representatives of their tribe. Though their exploitation mainly comes from outsiders, their internal social relations have also reduced them to face the oppression from the oppressor due to their lack of spirit of fraternity. They have their greed and self-centred attitude only to have their personal benefits and to maintain their status. Not having care and concern for their own tribal community, Sukru Jani becomes the victim of the same, with no chance to restore his normal life of tribal existence. Their exposure to the materialistic life of modern world proves their tragic path and oppression by the high-class people. It is a complete atrocity against them, violating their normal way of life and hopes. An entry of modernization in to the world of the tribal people has created a havoc and nightmare in their life. Their shift from master to labourer seem to impact their life in diverse ways of living and leading. Paraja are agriculture-based people, with both shifting and plain cultivation. With this, their ancestral fertile lands are their cherished treasure for generations following their traditional rules and rights. They are completely ignorant about the forest laws of the government. Mohanty aptly mentions their simple logic for their claim of land:

What beautiful lands they are! And all these forest lands can be reclaimed and crops raised on them! Why should there be forests, when they mean nothing to us, and not crops? After all, no one can own the forest. Land can be owned by anyone and the owner can grow crops there. God created all these and for human beings - what a shame that man prevents his fellow men from putting them to their proper use! (*Paraja* - 23). The harassment to Sukru Jani and the way he is made helpless on all counts of life not only embody the dismal state of tribal people but reminds us the issue of "haves and have not the powerful and powerless and the destruction of values which have been cherished for years-a culture of identity. He is punished by the government officials, with fine for felling trees illegally, which causes him to face the difficult challenges of life resulting in his ruin of everything culture, family, daughters, sons and finally a Paraja tribe! His people of the tribe do not support him, Hind give him wrong suggestions only to favour the Forest Guard and the Sahukar, representing him a criminal in the court. Mohanty mentions how Sukru Jani urges in the court:

I am not guilty, great lords', Sukru Jani pleaded. I have committed no crime. I will swear by your Book of Sections that I am innocent. I will swear by the man-eating tiger, I will stand on a tiger's skin and take the oath. Give me any oath you like arut I will swear my innocence. How can I pay such a heavy fine, great lord? Have pity, have mercy! (*Paraja* - 36) The life of Sukru Jani is sadly remarked by Mohanty saying "a single puff of wind can destroy what has taken a field-mouse a lifetime to amass." (*Paraja* - 36) The village headman mounts the pressure on him to take the loan from the Sahukar, becoming his 'goti', bonded labourer and pay the fine to the Forest Guard. Sukru Jani is well aware of the ill-effects of borrowing money from the money-lender like other people of the hills. He would work like a slave for a year and what he would get is meager amount of five rupees which would be subtracted from his principal amount. Loan would never be repaid off!

With two options either to go to the jail or to borrow loan from the Sahukar becoming a bonded labourer, he prefers latter unwillingly as going to jails is considered as a taboo in the Paraja tribe. Being illiterate, Sukru Jani doesn't understand what the Sahukar had written in the agreement of deed while borrowing money from him. Though he consoles himself stating that "Every man is some other man's goti." (*Paraja* - 47), treated like animals, he and his sons are deadly exploited by the Sahukar's cruelty and greed. More than that, his ancestral fertile land is captured by the Sahukar with his callous calculation, even after Sukru Jani and his sons are ready to repay the loan. It is great shock to him, and for that he plans to go to the court to get justice, hoping that he would get his land back, but everything turns against him including his own men of the community who become witnesses to the Sahukar. Sukru Jani, completely broken, prays to his ancestral god; he bowed low and beat his head on the ground in deep obeisance to his gods and prayed:

O Dadi Budha, Soul of my first ancestor, Almighty Dharmu; Dharatini, Mother Earth: and I will sacrifice as many pigeons and fowl as you wish. (*Paraja* - 355). Obviously unbearable to him and his son, they react violently killing the Sarkar to seek the justice of self-satisfaction as anger defines their way of revenge. Thus, the Paraja people in particular and the tribal in general have highly been the point of social oppression and forced servitude. The tragedy of Sukru Jani and his family represent "Land alienation, lack of opportunities for education and almost any form of development, misappropriation of wages and the products of labour, sexual abuse and lack of political representation, all these are hallmarks of marginalized tribal community" (Das - 2). This has led out the hopes and aspirations of the tribal people, their innocent but honest attempt of co-living and co-relations with nature, animals and man, their give-and-take relations with the natural resources, and their long-term happiness and sense of present in the company of nature, worshipping aspects of nature and animals with their submission to the power of nature. Their voices are crushed and made silent by the ruling class and they are treated as uncivilized and inferior. The protest of Sukru Jani for his legal claim is manipulated in the court of law by the oppressor. The power politics define who is right and what is right, making them suffer and side-lined. The following lines put light on the plight of the tribal people especially tribal women: Innocent tribal women born and brought up in a simple and natural environment, are forced to enter into a complex and artificial environment without their will and approval...exploitation and harassment by government officials, contractors, money-lenders control over cohesive family systems, forced migration and consequent disintegration of family, class kinship and flouting of values, taboo and customs in violation of traditional setting, loss of human touch and purity of mind, emergence of different attitudes, artificiality, suspicion, helplessness and alienation are the main among others, which make women's life miserable and meaningless. (Sharma - 280). These tribal people cultivate their crops and have some specific food habits. Being hill cultivators, the Paraja have their self-captured and declared land for their farming and livelihood. Maize, chillies and tobacco are sown in the tiny squares of land and they are hedged by the wild tania shrub. Mandia, olsi and kandula are their Apple food. Mainly they depend on these different millets for their whole meal. Along with these, on the hills these people grow orchards of bananas, pineapples and oranges. They have their patch of grow - a red-gram plant and guava tree.

Their whole meal is boiled, cooked and taken in liquid form. Mandia gruel, made from mandia flour, is their main course liquid food, taken in every morning and evening. Mandia Peja is a delicious drink made of stale boiled rice water and mandia powder. Mango seeds are one of the important foods of the Paraja tribe. They are elected from the forest and stored in their living room as a part of food security. Those seeds are later crushed into powder to be boiled and eaten. Oil is made from esha seeds, a wild hedge-plant. Their most favourite sweet is made of rice which they do not forget to buy in the weekly market. Use of earthen pots is remarkable for storing and cooking food. Mohanty depicts how Jili cooks:

"She takes Jerle powdered mandia or mango-seed flour in an earthen pot, adds a few edible leaves, pours water into the pot and sets it on the fire to boil." (*Paraja* - 2). Being poor they do not have enough clothes to cover their body. Loincloth is a piece of cloth used by the Paraja men to hide their private parts which they put on around their waist and hips. It is a one-piece garment, sometimes used with belt. Loincloth is a common and regular dressing, popular among the Paraja men. Women and girls wear cotton saris to cover their body. Bathing pools and bath-culture are distinct among the Paraja community. Some low waterfalls are used by the Paraja people as bathing-pools. Women take fair bath at about midday in the stream which flow down the hillside. A large banyan tree provides shade for the pool and privacy for women. Gopinath Mohanty points out how women of the Paraja tribe take their naked bath with no trouble or sexual paces from the Paraja men. The writer distinctly points out:

"While the girls were bathing in the stream, two men of the Paraja tribe could be seen going up the mound overlooking the pool. Each carried a bamboo pole on his shoulder, with a heavy cue suspended from either end. They mopped the sweat of their brows as they met, and they looked neither to right nor to left." (*Paraja* - 8). One more distinct feature of the Paraja tribe shown in the novel is that the Paraja girls are not allowed to work as paid labourers. As per their culture, they only work for their father and husband, just to support them. The Paraja life shown in the novel marks their representation in their seasonal celebration of festivals, their dances and songs, their life in the forest, their behaviour and their ethnographic focus with their family and food. The oppression by the office authority is also noteworthy. The forest guard is shown to be an insignificant rank in the official hierarchy, but is highly respected by the tribal people. He is a mere guard to catch people felling trees in the jungle, but he has the right to fine & prosecute the people for felling trees, collecting honey without license, cutting down a piasal tree for timber and clearing a patch of jungle to grow crops. The offenders were answerable to him for such so-called illegal activities. He collects the 'plough tax' from the villagers who own a pair of bullocks, allowing them to graze their cattle. Thus, he is not a 'mean lord' for the people living at the hills. He exploits them in many ways and asks for sexual favours for the tribal women and girls. His arrival is a great signal to the villagers and they offer their gifts in his service as a mark of respect. For not fulfilling his demands of sensuous lust with Jili, he takes revenge on Sukru Jani for felling trees, though permitted by him, and is mainly responsible to ruin the life of Sukru Jani. Sombari, Sukru Jani's wife, suddenly disappears from the jungle and she is considered to have been killed by the man-eating tiger, who had killed more than dozens of people from the nearby villages.

Their common discussions point out how the tiger has separate killing strategy for men and women. They are of the opinion that women are first raped by the tiger and then killed, but for men, tigers have different strategy. Also, they have the stories of some villagers of how they got escaped from the clutches of the tiger when they were caught.

Conclusion

The novel has varied dimensions of inferences and deliberations the way the novel progresses centering the paraja people. The novel showcases aesthetic panorama of the Paraja tribe's songs and dances, foods and dresses, ornaments and decorations, marriage system and other varied details of socio-cultural aspects which they follow in their periphery of life and on the other hand their beliefs, gods and goddesses, rites and rituals, black magic, worshipping aspects of nature and animals, and knowledge of herbs and medicine. Their compliance with the nature is a balance between their life and works and the conservation of nature. Their materialist approach is clear with their objective reality as they have a strong affinity and love for their land, agricultural produce and other elements of nature. A crystal living of life is their hallmark of earthly existence. They have their worries and moments of happiness, anger and hate, love and affection and these emotions are humanizing elements to live as a man in the world of give and take. But their darker side which portrays their deterioration of culture with the interference of non-tribals, the government policies and the officials as these non-tribal people have their vested interest in the huge natural resources available in the deep forest and in the mountains where these tribal people live.

With their vested interest, an exploitation of the tribe starts. This is clearly seen in *Paraja* how Sukru Jani symbolizes the entire paraja tribe men who today or tomorrow will have faced the same. Their exploitation is not merely limited to snatching their fertile lands but the exploitation on all counts including sexual exploitation of their girls and women. The money-lender, the forest guard, judiciary system and other government officials and road contractors have all their hands to exploit them, to harass them, and to finish them. Nobody empathizes for them. They are only interested with their benefits and selfish motive. The insiders' role has given chance to the outsiders to interfere with their life and to exploit them with the support of the insiders. He is forced to take loan and to be a bonded labour by his own men. More than that, they are corrupt and selfish. This results in the tragedy of Sukru Jani. This shows how the paraja people have lost their culture and tradition and they had to accept different ways for their livelihood. Leaving aside their legacy of culture, they became labourers at the construction site and are still leading a life of servitude.

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