

Tracing Tribal Women's Identity in Mohanty's *Paraja*: A feminist Prexis

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Abstract: This paper attempts to examine the English version of Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja*. The novel portrays the struggle for survival of the Paraja tribe in Orissa. The Paraja becomes in the novel representatives of the down-trodden and oppressed section of the society where even their women folk and children are not spared the horrors of subjection. The novel sensitises the readers to the millions of tortured indigenous people all over the world. The novel attempts to picture how tribal men and women become slaves and go to the dominant class and pays for their ignorance and innocence. Tribal girls become sexual commodities and discarded as a plaything. The issues pertinent to this study is what happens to women characters in the scene of exploitation and what is the nature of exploitation. Since the novel is about the tribal way of life, we also get a glimpse of how tribal women are represented in literature.

Keywords: down trodden, indigenous people, tribal women.

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Review of Literature

Gopinath Mohanty's award winning novel *Paraja* [1], translated by Bikram. K. Das into English has documented the life, customs, the culture, the festivals and the songs and dances of the Paraja tribe of the Koraput region of Orissa. The Paraja are one of the well-known tribes of Orissa. The term Paraja is a local Oriya term sometimes pronounced as Paraja, Parja or Poroja. It appears to be derived from the Sanskrit word Praja, which literally means common people, "This novel takes its name from the aboriginal Paraja tribe which has its home among the rugged mountains and forests of Koraput in Orissa. The protagonist of the novel Sukru Jani, is a patriarch of the Paraja tribe: his story is the story of the tribe –in fact of all the tribes to whom these mountain and forests belong" (*Parajav*, Translator's Introduction) [2].

Mohanty was a prolific writer and he has written more than ten novels and many volumes of short stories. Most of his writings are in his mother tongue Oriya and only few have been translated into English. From his first-hand experience he saw the exploitation of the innocent tribals and this finds expression in his novels, "Their tale is a sad one but possesses immense charm. Gopinath Mohanty who spent a life time trying to understand these tribals of the mountains and forests, attempts to tell their story in several of his major

novels. *Paraja*, perhaps the most poignant and lyrical of these, is a remarkable work by any standards and rank among the masterpiece of Indian writing in this century" (*Paraja v*). The universal tale of oppressor and the oppressed is voiced here through the first hand experience of the author as:

The theme of human endurance in the face of tragedy must be universal, but what is uniquely Indian about Gopinath Mohanty's rendering is certain compassion. He is too much in love with life to be a detached observer or critic. His sympathy flows generously and impartially to everything in creation. Ultimately, there are no oppressors or oppressed in his universe. The tyrant is as much to be pitied as the victim. Pain is transmuted into a form of cosmic laughter (*Paraja viii*).

Sukrujani is the main protagonist of the novel and the novel revolves round him, his two sons Mandia and Tikra and his two daughters Jili and Bili. SukruJani's wife is already dead when the novel begins, "It is three years since his wife Sombari went out, early one morning, to collect edible leaves in the bear George and never came back. A man eating tiger of the big, striped Mahabala species had been lurking in the dense

undergrowth in the George: it pounced on her and dragged her away. Since then, Sukrujani has lived with his sons Mandia and Tikra, and his daughters Jili and Bili” (Paraja 2). Initially the family has a happy existence .But as the novel progresses the happiness of Sukrujani and his family is short lived. The disapproving eyes of the modern society soon appear to trap the tribals [3].

The young, charming and beautiful tribal girls, Jili who is seventeen and Bili who is fourteen are living happily in their community .In their community the girls do not suffer any sense of shame and inhibition as they bath naked in the open casting off their clothes . Besides in this tribal community girls and boys could mingle freely courting between young boys and girls had the sanction of the community, “In the centre of the village was a hut which served as a dormitory for all the unmarried girls in the village , while a little way off was the men’s dormitory. It was an ancient Paraja custom for all unmarried boys and girls to sleep in their respective dormitories, rather than in their parents’ “home” (Paraja 14). The traditional system of protecting women was also not practised there. Teasing among the young was a part of life, “It was thus that the young people slept every night in their dormitories, away from their parents, with no taboos or restraints imposed on them” (Paraja 17). In the novel two young couples Jili –Bagla and Kajodi –Mandia are shown to be in love with each other.

The present study focuses on the tribal representation of women and their representation outside their community. Tribal society is a permissive society where its women enjoy more freedom and mobility than the non –tribal women. This can be proved through various customs that allow their women to live a liberated life. As has already been mentioned courting between young boys and girls is legitimated by the community .Thus a girl exercises her right to choose a partner. It’s the boy’s family that pays the price to the bride’s family .The girls have the liberty to indulge in jokes, move out of their homes. The traditional concept of protecting women was not among the Parajas. Even sex is not a taboo within this community. Jili and Bili can freely move about, bath in the open sleep in the dormitory make fun of men without any fear and inhibition. In all their activities they behave natural and spontaneous. But the permissiveness of the tribal society is restricted within their own community.

Mohanty presents two worlds in Paraja, the simple world of the tribals and the civilized and exploitative world of the Forest Guard, the Sahukar and the Supervisor. Sukrujani and subsequently both his sons end up as goti of the Sahukar. The dreams of Sukrujani are shattered before his eyes as they get caught in the unending web of exploitation. But the things became inexplicably torturous when Sukrujani had to put his daughters at stake. Firstly, it was none other than the

forest guard who asked for Jili and sent in KauParaja to ask Sukrujani to follow his orders .Here KauParaja reveals the mentality of these so called civilized men like Forest Guard, “When they ask for something, it has to be produced –even if it’s our wives and daughters: or else they’d have us all in handcuffs on some excuses or another in no time at all (Paraja 30). The pathetic ways in which the tribal women were treated by the non-tribals gets expressed in these words, “The trouble is, this old goat won’t spend a penny on a girl; he’s capable of snatching a girl away from her home, keeping her for a couple of days and then kicking her out. And it wouldn’t worry him if she went back to her people in disgrace or drowned herself in the river” (Paraja 126). The tribal women were sexually exploited without any concern as what will become of them and who will accept her. The only way left with them was to die to cover their shame or become a female goti and serve them unconditionally [4,5].

For Jili it was the forest guards first, then the supervisor and the Sahukar, who one after another exploited her sexually. With no fault of Jili, she became an outcaste to her own community. Her lover jilted her and married her friend Kajodi. Nowhere left to go, she accepted her position as a sexual servant to the aged Sahukar. Sukrujani is grim because the honour of his tribe has been outraged. A girl going outside the tribe is an act of humiliation and violation of social code. After her relationship with Sahukar made public all doors of the community were closed to the poor girl. Thus whereas a tribal woman is granted freedom within her own community the society does not give her freedom outside of it. The tribal world is possessive about its women .While the tribal men exercises his control over his woman he does not give that right to others .Outside the tribal community, in the hands of forest guard, Sahukar, Supervisor she became a commodity to be bought for a price. She is debased and devalued in this sex market .

Jili is not a woman to be subdued so easily, but she is rendered speechless under the burden of economic vulnerability. That why she couldn’t tell her father about the incident of the forest guard. Sex when forced became oppressive for her but she was helpless. Sukrujani no doubt resisted and protected his daughter from the forest guard but not for long because both Jili and Bili fall into the hands of the supervisor and then Sahukar. Stricken with grief, dejected in love driven by hunger the two girls make their way to the sexual market of the town where men sucked them up and plucked these two flowers at the very outset of their youth. Their life soon turned into a night mare once they move out of their village to the town.

Once outside their society, they become a tempting object for men .Body becomes their value as sex is the first thing to be sold out .Young and beautiful Jili and Bili become the object of the forest guard supervisor’s



and sahumars pursuit and lustful desires. Under the compulsion of the economic pressure, Jili and Bili end up trading their bodies .the role played by Rami, middle aged women of their community is significant in throwing these girls in the sex business as she convinces them, “What isn’t good? Rami said, caressing her back.’ In our tribes it’s perfectly normal for a girl to live with anyone she likes, for as long as she likes –there’s nothing immoral in that. And anyway, you shouldn’t be worrying your pretty little head about such things (Paraja 222). After a few sexual assaults on the insistence of Rami ,the girls fell into the pattern of getting ready in the evening on their own and moving on to the supervisor’s place to dance and perform for the whole night as said, “After that it was not necessary for Rami to come to them. The supervisor would lie in wait somewhere for either Jili or Bili, and neither was reluctant. And some times, there were other young men too. They fell easily into the pattern, finding only pleasure, with no after taste. They were all alike in their urges, all young” (Paraja 224). The girls were made to provide sexual pleasures to the same people who were exploiting their father and brothers by turning them as bonded labours.

Whereas the Sahukar does not mind a little bit of sex with a tribal girl like Jili he cannot think of legitimating the relationship into marriage. Jili was like any other girl to be used and discarded .He never gave her the place of a wife and his evil intentions get articulated when Jili’s father and brothers approach him seeking their land back .If a male bonded labour is put to inhuman physical condition, a woman who is taken as a mistress not a wife from among the tribals could be a female goti satisfying the owners sexual lust. Then again her body is owned on a price. The narrative reaches its climax when Sukrujani murders the Sahukar after listening to these filthy words for her dear daughters.

The Sahukar twisted his lips into a crooked smile, and said: Yes, Jili. And isn’t there

another called Bili at home still? Bring her to me .I have taken the land; I have taken one sister; and I shall take the other too .I shall take your wives; I shall drive you from court to court through the length of the country. I shall make you sweat out your lives as Gotis, and I shall rub lives as Gotis, and I shall rub your noses in the dust. If don’t, my name is not Ramchandra Bisoi (Paraja 372) [6].

The novel has been successful in bringing to the fore the silence of both Jili and Bili, as both the sisters became subaltern as they represent doubly marginalised status. Economic marginalisation as seen in *Paraja* throttles the women’s voice. Bereft of any mode of survival; the girls Jili and Bili trade their sex for their livelihood.

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