



GOPINATH MOHANTY AS A STURDY PROMOTER OF DISSENT LITERATURE IN INDIA: A CRITICAL READING OF *PARAJA* AND *DADI BUDHA*

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ABSTRACT

Gopinath Mohanty (1914–1991) a renowned Oriya writer who is known for portraying and interpreting several dimensions of human existence especially within the context of Oriya life seems to be dealing with the asserting ways of dissent both in the plains and in the hills. Depicting the divergent and distinct cultural identity which has been shaped by the tribal people, in particular with their various kinds of celebrating the vibrant life which has been beset with the hard-hitting miseries and adversities, Mohanty has etched new annals in the history of dissent literature in India.

INTRODUCTION

Paraja is a tragedy of the failed life of a tribal family, of its failed endeavours at betterment of living. It is a circumstantial tragedy that is generated by the insidious conspiracy of events...This paper focuses on the way the tribal communities assert their selves and express the way of disagreement towards the hegemonic tyranny the modernity and the various forms of pseudo-modern institutions such as court, policing, and government have inflicted upon them. Although Gopinath has tried his hand at various literary forms, it is for his this novel that he will be best remembered. “Fiction, I realized, would best suit my purpose”, he once said in an interview to Indian Literary Review. He uses the novel to portray and interpret several dimensions of human existence. He draws the material for his writing from his rich experience and transforms it imaginatively into a powerful image of life.

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Mohanty belongs to a generation of writers to whom social commitment comes naturally. *Paraja*, like all his other novels, is born out of passionate social awareness, verging on anger. At a basic level, his two works along with other texts also have to be interpreted as an indictment of social oppression and abuse. Among his novels, *Dadi Budha*, *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana* and *Aphanca* are remarkable for their portrayal of tribal life in the densely wooded hills and forests of the Eastern Ghats. As a member of the state civil service, Gopinath Mohanty had the opportunity of working in Koraput, a district with a predominantly tribal population. He got deeply interested in the tribal lifestyle and culture, and transformed them into rich fictional narratives.

Dadi Budha marks a significant shift of focus in Oriya fiction from the social conditions of coastal districts to those of the tribal districts of Odessa. The *Kondhs* and the *Parajas* are two colourful and proud tribal communities living in tiny clusters of helmets in the southern parts of Odessa. People of these primitive communities have been exploited by moneylenders and petty government officials for many years. They have felt in their body and bone that exploitation is as old as the hills and forest surrounding them. Yet they celebrate the joys of life; they drink and dance and sing; they find joy in nature, in buds and flowers, in green leaves, in the chirping of birds, in the swift-flowing streams and in the mist covered hills. They find life constantly renewing itself in the quick-fading and slow-blooming buds of the forest.

In *Paraja* the exploiter who is outwardly a non-tribal moneylender is in reality the entire ethos of a materialistic civilization seeking to encroach upon and engulf a primordial and elemental way of life. Very interestingly, here in the novel Mohanty is not getting into any usual ideological fights in the manner of historians, economists and sociologists. The characters he creates are real people set in a three-dimensional landscape. He has known the sounds and smells of the jungle he so lovingly evokes; he has obviously suffered and exulted with *Sukru Jani* and his tribe, drunk rice-beer with them, sung their songs, danced at their harvest festivals and starved with them when the rains failed.

Paraja is a faithful record of the beliefs, manners, rituals and customs of the *Paraja* tribe and also a moving narrative of hopes and fears of hapless tribes who are untouched by urban and modern ways of living and thinking. The setting of *Paraja* is a small village, *Sarsupadar*, of *Koraput* District in the tribal belts of the Eastern Ghats of Odessa. The village is inhabited by the *Paraja* and the *Domb* tribes. The plot of the novel is perceived against the exploitation of petty government officials and money-lenders in the context of colonial Odessa. *Sukru Jani* is an old *paraja* with two sons and two daughters. The local forest guard asks *Sukru Jani* to send one of his daughters to him for a night. When *Sukru Jani* refuses to do so, the forest guard, out of anger, imposes a heavy fine on him for illegal felling of trees and later imposes fine on his



son on charges of brewing illicit liquor. To pay the fine, *Sukru Jani* and his two sons borrow money from the local money-lender and work as bonded labourers for some years. The money-lender dupes the poor tribals, appropriates their land and keeps one of the daughters of *Sukru Jani* as his concubine. When *Sukru Jani* and his sons discover that the money-lender is in no mood to return the land they had hypothecated, they kill him with an axe and surrender themselves to the local police. *Paraja* thus ends with a tragic note.

The main character *Sukru Jani* is not merely the primitive tribesman ensnared by the predatory moneylender from the city; he is also quintessential man, waging heroic but futile war against a hostile universe, struggling ceaselessly to accept and adjust. The choice of the tribal canvas, whether by accident or design, becomes singularly appropriate to Mohanty's theme: the primeval consciousness of the tribal protagonists reflects perfectly the situation of the archetypal human being; their stark joys and interwoven anguish embody the complexity of the human condition. The extreme sort of dissent is vivid when we find that the contrast between natural and man-made calamity is glaring. *Sukru Jani's* wife, *Sombari*, was dragged away one day by a man-eating tiger as she collected dry twigs in the forest. Though *Sukru Jani* suffers out of this bitter tragedy, for him this event is comprehensive since it is part of life. What he cannot comprehend is the infinitely convoluted process by which he and his children are transformed from free men into *gotis* or serfs, bound to the *Sahukar* forever.

Dadi Budha (1944) is one of the shorter novels of Gopinath Mohanty. It has the distinction of being his first novel based on tribal life. The novel tells the moving story of the disintegration of a tribal community under the impact of modern civilization. *Dadi Budha* is an ancient palm tree representing the eternal ancestor; it stands for the cultural heritage of the tribal people manifest in their rituals and costumes. The tree stands as a silent witness to the joys and sorrows of the tribal folk; it dominated the drama of their existence. Close to *Dadi Budha* stands a termite mound called *Hunka Budha*, yet another symbol of the primitive and innocent faith of tribal people. *Thenga Jani*, the son of *Ram Chandra Muduli*, the headmen of *Lulla* village, is betrothed to a beautiful girl, *Saria Daan*, the only daughter of the same village. But he comes under the spell of *Sanotsh Kumari*, a Christian dumb girl. *Thenga* and *Santosh* fall deeply in love and reject the discipline of the tribal society. They decide to run away to Assam to work on a tea estate; they planned to build their dream home in a town where the rule of the tribal society does not prevail. *Gopinath* visualizes life of tribal community against a cosmic background. The despair of *Ram Muduli*, the plight of *Thenga's* mother after her only son leaves the village with the Dumb girl, the declaration of the *Dishari* that *Thenga* and *Santosh* were evil *dumas*, the terror caused by the tiger and the rise of a village at another site all these signify the unbroken continuity of life.



Almost all the characters especially the female characters and the young characters in *Parajavehemently* show their dissent through various ways of expression. Mohanty considerably gives an account of Tribal women's dual oppression on account of gender and tribal as well as other discriminated situations of womanhood. *Paraja* explores the female subjugation and subordination in a great way along with dealing with repeatedly discussed issues related to women such as of rape, sexual assaults, physical violence at work place and etc the novel which in one sense stands as an autobiography of the tribe *Paraja* gives some more issues concerning women such as mental harassment, loneliness, and more over carelessness from the part of the insider and overwhelmingly from the outsiders as well. Parallel to all these, the dissent of these characters against the dictates of the modern systems of judiciary and police and other institutions are inflicting upon them shows the way Mohanty reveals the aspects of dissent literature.

Mohanty exposes gender problems both outside and inside the community of *Paraja* and talks about the wretched condition of women and their dissent against the imposed notions of womanhood among them. This long narration accommodates more than ten female characters among which I would like to focus on the character *Jili* who is one of the most tragic figures in the novel especially regarding her depression and desolation she felt because she was a woman. Thus novel gives a thorough picture of the tribal women's life and their struggle for their entity as an evitable part of the society or the community's autobiography unfolds the story of women under colonial system of government. Mohanty very diligently illustrates the impact of discrimination and oppression and above all, some sort of resistance which has been taken up by the female characters.

Their life as tribal women is from top to bottom assimilated to the blessed endowments of the nature. They hardly know the deceptive sort of characters in the every nook and corner of life. Even in the bitter circumstances of the life whether may be related to love or something like that they stuck to these good qualities. The women characters in the novel can be seen passing through bitter harsh experience in every field. Despite of the harsh eyes of the forest guards followed their bodies all the time in particular when they went to pool, with cattle to graze etc. They won't allow themselves to be beaten by anybody in a skirmish of wit of any kind. This can be seen in *Jili* when she expressed her arrogance with forest guard when he surpassed the limit in flirtation and she made a fool himself. They resisted all the immense promises and offerings they have been flooding upon them. A strong dissent against the external constructed laws seems to be expressed while the *Paraja* women have bath naked: an extreme act of assimilation with the nature simultaneously disagreeing with the laws imposed upon.



The women in the novel look always leaving a mark of dissent against the mainstream notions of life. They are always extremely dedicated for work that is why the main criteria for a good woman among *Parajas* were nothing like dowry, beauty, etc but hard work. This is exemplified in *Kajodi* the betrothed girl to *Mandia* whose hard work and consistency in the fields made *Sukru* to agree with him in hurry. The notion of this ideal woman among tribal people is evident in the words of *Jili* “I m not like one of those lazy women from the plains who do not work and only cat and sit at home” (Mohanty 78).

From the time *Mandia* had been arrested for distilling liquor “illegally” *Jili* was the head of the family. She was the main source of income. She had to go out into the jungle each day and collect edible roots. It is very notable that once she along with *Bili* realized the miserable and desolate condition of the family she felt no going to dance and playing. The imagination and aspiration of the female characters can be always summoned in a totality of immersing in the edifice of struggle to life and disagreement with the mainstream notions of womanhood. The desire of *Kajodi* for a ‘husband who would come to her after the day’s work, damp with sweat, and the muddy child that she could hug in her arms’ symbolizes this in a better way which contrasts to the aspirations of modern ‘civilized’ girls whose entire dreams are based on the materialistic entertainments bedecked with hallucinated castles of desires which are far from the realities.

Paraja girls along with the boys may not have sexual innocence. The dormitories of *dhangdas* and *dhangdis* (young adivasi boys and girls) are their socially sanctioned springboards of sexual freedom. But for them sexual trade is unthinkable which was sought by *Sahukar*. The latter is even tantamount to the desecration of their deity, *Dharma* (the just one). This kind of dissent pervades the entire novel and characters in its intense level. The excessive dissent against the supervisor in the working place is praiseworthy despite of his flooding provocations in the stark moments of the horrible life.

Although Frustration and famine (*Jili* and *Bili* live on tubers and twig for days) eat away *Jili*’s spirit and the happy-go-lucky sparkling girl crumples up with fitful gloom and real fear ‘thinking of nothing except her loneliness. She felt herself growing old without having received anything from life. She had gathered nothing, saved nothing and there was no one to call her own’ But she refuses to go down and try to find a job in her own way.

Again, the traumatic condition of *Jili* as she was helplessly trapped in when *Kau paraja* told *Sukru* about her going to *Sahukar* and the father told her “don’t show your face here again”. All doors are closed to *Jili* in this critical condition where she had been compelled to do and obey the order of *Sahukar*. This pathetic state of *Jili* whose mother is no more to console her reflects the patriarchal hegemony existed among tribal people. So far she had seen her



relationship with Sahukar through a romantic haze, but now she is compelled to see it in the harsh light of necessary. Though the whole affair was sordid and ugly she found no choice but to go back to him and beg him to let her have a place at his feet. The extreme agony felt at aversion got from others can be seen reflecting in her words when she says “I came here of my own accord” when head man asked her “how did you come to be here”. It is well evident that she was still having a pulling feeling to go and to be with his father and brothers because even when *Sahukar* outstretched to embrace her after the talk between head man and him she was lost in her own thoughts of going with his father and brothers.

The extreme way of dissent of *Jili* with *Bagla* becoming the *gotiis* evident in her words “I will never allow you to bind yourself as a *goti*” as a reply to *Bagla* when he says “I will take u soon, my darling. I am only waiting to harvest my paddy. As soon as I have the money I shall come for you, and if I can’t find the money any other way I shall borrow it and I become a *goti*” (Mohanty 78). It is very notable that this was at a peak time when she was feeling the warmth of love and romance as *Bagla* embraced her again and again.

Mandia, the second son of Sukru Jani was arrested for illicitly distilling liquor and was found in possession of articles used in illicit distillation. All the scaring pseudo showings of the court and magistrate doesn’t seem to be making *Mandia* fearful. After executing a bail bond and offering a surety he went home “he set out for his village along the dark and narrow mountain path, with that old, effortless stride of his, like a panther’s. Outwardly it was the same *Mandia*; the head was still carried high and the powerful chest was thrown out” (Mohanty 102). There was no sorrow, no pain-“no time to reflect on the experience they had overtaken him and now, as retreated to his hut, he imagined he was a young barking- deer” (Mohanty 103).

The songs and dance shape the life of the *Parajas* which has been entangled with miseries and hardships. The songs acted for them something special. Unlike the modern musical shows their gathering and dancing in the intoxication of the night – in a way- was a way of asserting their identity and raising the voice of not conquering in front of others. This dance which is the expression of the untainted affinity towards the way of life they are leading is confined in the totality of the joy they show during these songs. Instead of being passive or submissive towards the shackles made by the police or the forest guard or by some colonial representatives, the tribal life seems to be full of fever of activity.

The narrative is replete with descriptions of tribal customs and rituals and the narrative style is movingly lyrical and dramatic. It is also a historical document that reveals the reality of tribal life in terms of both the celebration of joy and the passive endurance of pain, hardship and suffering in the face of exploitation and poverty. The novels of Gopinath Mohanty



published during the forties are not only among his best works, but also are forerunners of his later novels which continued to articulate his preoccupations with tribal life, the predicament of the downtrodden and the anguish of human existence torn between freedom and social restraint, nature and culture.

Apart from merely depicting the series of miseries of this tribal community the paper seriously deals with the traces of dissent the characters express despite of being isolated from the society. This powerful dissent of these subaltern tribes is not supposed to be kept alone and sympathised with, but instead, it needs to be concerned with, and to be continuously followed by commanding models of resistance. Mohanty in this way has showed us the model how to utilize the artistic power and recognize this in an impressive and stronger way.

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