



Re-writing Tribal History: A Critique of Gopinath Mohanty's Novel *Paraja*

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The present research paper attempts a re-writing of tribal history in contrast to official history. The literary representations of the tribal history and landscape are different from official discourse in more than one sense. First, most of the literary representations of tribal belt offer a critical understanding of the tribal institutions and customs. Second, it underscores the conflict between tribal and civil ethos due to modernization of the tribal belt. Third, it also seeks to preserve art, aesthetics and culture of the tribal landscape. Fourth, it deals with the universal theme of man versus nature. Finally, the study strives to record the primitive culture which is usually under-represented in the official and popular discourse.

The 'tribal belt' which is the backdrop of the novel *Paraja*, is densely populated with tribal communities. The space is fertile in mineral-resources. It is the epicenter of contrasting images. The *adivasis* or tribal people of the locality are either portrayed as naïve, innocent and helpless creatures or aggressive, militant and habitual offenders. The official accounts of 'tribal space' set a negative image of the natives which concentrate on the dark, bleak and gloomy side of the embattled zone emphasizing blood, violence and terror. By contrast, literary writings attempt to reclaim tribal's glorious past and culture. The writer has reflected upon the bright and rich cultural tradition of natives which is decaying under poverty, hunger, debt and unemployment. The present study finds 'tribal belt' as a site of struggle where tribal men and women are forced to become *gotis*¹ (bonded laborers). A sense of common victimhood brings class and caste together to fight against the oppression. They fight for basic amenities, self-rule and right to dignity. Within this context, the re-writing of tribal history might be seen in contrast with the official history which brand tribal people as habitual-offenders².

The present study also attempts to explore the nuances and complexities of the space, because the geography of tribal belt has become a center of narrative theorization in official, popular and literary discourse. As German scholar Klaus Schlichte has rightly postulated the spatial-politics³ of landscape:

The writings of military and strategic experts about [tribal land] ...tend to justify the ways of the state concerned while authors who are socially and politically aware often tend to sympathize and romanticize sites of armed movements in seemingly exotic surroundings (Schlichte ix).

The novel *Paraja* (1945) was originally written in Oriya language by Gopinath Mohanty. Mohanty is best remembered for his contribution to Oriya Literature. The portrayal of tribal as well as rural life is central to his literary endeavour. In his fiction, reader finds different dimensions of reality both from the life in plains and hills. His narrative style is unique. It is replete with colloquial language, phrases and idioms. His writings are often compared with legendary postcolonial writings of Chinua Achebe and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o. Mohanty's writings demand a nativist approach⁴ to unfold the meaning. He draws material for his writings from his experience as an administrator in tribal area and his close affinity with the cause of oppressed communities. He confessed in an interview to *Indian Literary Review* that fiction would best suit his purpose due to its wide reach and scope.

The novel *Paraja* has a close resemblance with the Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Both the novels present poignant narratives of tribal-sufferings due to invasion of their culture from outside. *Paraja* is an honest articulation of tribal unrest, in Indian context. The importance of the novel lies in the fact that it captures the essence of the spatial aspects of what is known as 'tribal-belt' in present times. The book opens with a panoramic view which reveals a window into the space of 'tribal-belt'. The site appears full of life. It is more than mere a piece of geographical land or container of scenic beauty. Here, the reader would find the primitive tribal societies living in harmony with nature. It gives an impression of tribal life and culture. The manner in which message is carved out on the landscape of 'tribal-belt' deserves a critical look. The opening of the novel builds wordsworthian idyllic images of the tribal community –Paraja, which then start 'falling apart'.

Viewed from the winding road on the fearsome mountain- pass known as the Dharam-Dooar –'The Gate of Truth' – the scene below is one of the violent struggle. It is a landscape of hills fighting. They stand in two rows facing each other, forty hills on one side and fifty on the other, *wrestling for a foothold* (emphasis added) (1).



An unseen narrator recounts the tale of 'tribal-belt' in the manner of *katha*. The initial slow and peaceful narration of the story symbolizes the peaceful existence of the tribal people which starts disintegrating with the pace of narrative as the writer introduces 'outsiders' in the narrative. The novel *Paraja* has a rich texture as the writer sees the tribal and the civil characters in a diametrically opposite framework. On the one hand, the tribal characters such as Sukru Jani, Kajodi, Mandia, Bagla and Tikra are always portrayed as naïve, innocent, vulnerable and pleasure-loving, the non-tribal characters such as Sahukar, Madhu Ghasi, Phaul Domb and the forest guard are described as lecherous, deceptive, corrupt, shrewd and greedy.

The binary view –the tribal versus the civil is also prolonged to their physical appearances. Sukru Jani has a robust body –“a mass of bulging muscles; his calves are as hard as rock and his bare skin is proof against all weather” (6). Bagla is “like a straight and tall saal tree” (16). Jili is appreciated for her remarkable beauty –“she is like the siali creeper which spreads over itself all over the saal tree with its clinging tendrils” (16). Mandia is –“all man, with a powerful body” (72) By contrast, the portraits of the non-tribal characters emphasis on their facial expressions, which are caricatures. The character of *Sahukar* is described as having –“thick, drooping moustaches which trailed in any liquid he sipped ...a smile played constantly on his thick lips” (48). Phaul Domb has “always a smile playing on his long, thin face, so like the snout of a mongoose” (39); Madhu Ghasi is “a sturdy young man with thick lips and pink eyes” (255).

The novelist beautifully crafts the eroticism of tribal body in various ways. First, the writer dwells on the beauty of tribal woman Jili. Her nakedness symbolizes a sexuality which is not repressed. It is innocent and unrestrained. Second, the tribal dormitory symbolizes an idealized space for spontaneous love to flourish. The dormitory is a site of courtship and the courtship ends in exploring the soul-mates. It is a token of egalitarian society –free from gender bias; dormitory is site where all young tribal man and women mingle with each other without any restraint. In the tribal world, love is allowed to blossom freely and spontaneously. Third, Jili and her sister Bili take a plunge naked in the pool under the sneaky gaze of the lusty forest guard. The gaze represents the voyeuristic gaze of the intrusive 'civilised' world. Comparing it with Bagla's gaze, it may be said that both seem equally wanting though Bagla's gaze is more controlled and undefiled. Besides, his presence is privately accepted by Jili while the forest guard's presence is intimidating and unknown to the bathing tribal women. Thus, the writer posits that once outside their idealized space of dormitory, the tribal women become prey to aggressive 'outsiders'.

The writer deals realistically with the diverse aspects of the 'tribal-belt'. The progression of the story is simple and straight but at times the authorial voice intervenes especially when commenting upon the issues like the land-crisis, government's prohibition policy and the forest laws. Apparently, the novel is a love tale of two couples or a story of young romance. But, the internal structure and coherence of the story reveals it to be an account of the eternal conflict between master and slave; rich and poor; exploiter and exploited; nature and culture; tribal and civil. Mohanty's characterization is replete with binary images viz. peace/violence, life/death and order/disorder. There are fearsome mountains and rejuvenating forests, violent struggle and peaceful waterfall confronting each other for existence. It is a detailed account of flowers and fauna, man and animal, tribal and non-tribal or insider and outsider contesting for an *existential* foothold (emphasis added). It is a zone of eternal struggle. The milieu in Mohanty's novel operates at three levels – (i) emotional (ii) commercial (iii) spiritual.

Paraja presents a naturalistic account of an endangered state of tribal habitat. It is a realistic portrayal of the Paraja and the Kondh tribes –the mute Fourth World⁵. In the novel, Mohanty has delineated his characters as caught into the existential circumstance. The protagonist Sukru Jani fights against a hostile universe. His existential angst forms the fabric of the narrative. He faces his life against all odds. His anxiety, anguish and plight are universal. The most pertinent description of the novel captures the essence of tribal life –these people are indefatigable. They do not accept defeat and maintain a spirit to live in a hostile universe without murmuring. Conviction is their life-force. They are firm and bold like Thomas Hardy's Gabriel Oak. They stand firmly and live a life that Providence has granted them. It is through their struggle that they provide meaning to their vulnerable existence. Their tragic doom attracts the writer to document their reality and to bring it to reader's eye. Mohanty's characterization has attained the heights of naturalism. It is a journey of the protagonist from an innocent, naïve and simple tribesman to a ruthless, rebel and killer man. The primary subject of exploration is to see how Sukru Jani is trapped. His never ending sufferings and trials immortalize him.

The questions of materiality and spirituality are beyond Sukru Jani's terrible existence. Even beyond that, he does not hold guilty anyone of his present circumstances and this is his biggest predicament that he cannot apprehend a man-made trap. He gives a tough challenge to every situation. Even when he hears about his daughter's secret visit to Ramchandra Bisoi, he feels frustrated but remains composed. He accepts the fate even when the villagers decide Jili's hand to the landlord Bisoi's who was a mean and debauched person. He is propelled to give consent to the proposed bride-price⁶ as he could not go against the will and power of Sahukar Bisoi. He endures whatever befalls on him be it landlord's exploitation, imprisonment of his son Mandia, or abusive behaviour of forest guard. But there comes a point when he feels his dignity is at stake. A constant provocation of Sahukar Bisoi makes him behave violently. The novelist accentuates it in a very sensitive language:

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've taken the land; I've taken one sister; and I shall take the other too. I shall take your wives; I shall [...] rub your nose in the dust. If I don't, my name is not Ramachandra Bisoi! (372).



The way the writer has capitalized on the raw emotions of tribes is commendable for its craftsmanship. The writer has successfully portrayed his characters made up of flesh and blood. They are content with their hardships and struggle. They are living in the lap of the nature where time flow is spontaneous and continuous. Any sort of mechanics or tactics is beyond his behaviour. Everything seems perfect in an apple pie order. But, unfortunately, outside world is too harsh to bear upon his happiness. There are some people who exploit their work, land and emotions. The way rebel Sukru and his two sons surrender themselves to the authority at police station after the murder of Sahukar Bisoi, is highly shocking and unconventional. It is not expected in civil life. Indian Law does not hold a person guilty without understanding the nature and circumstances under which a crime is done. Sukru Jani is not a culprit *prima facie* as Sahukar's foul language provoked him to act violently. An excerpt from the text highlights the tension between Sahukar and Sukru:

You've cheated us out of the land, Sahukar, but you won't enjoy it! You won't enjoy it! In a flash he raised his axe and brought it down on the Sahukar's head. Immediately the other two joined in. The Sahukar fell like an axed tree, and Mandia went on the dealing blow after blow ... (Paraja 373)

This is how the writer paints the emotional gravity of the events and its impact. Sukru Jani has committed a murder though reluctantly. This is not what he wanted or desired but was forced to commit such a heinous crime. As soon as he regains normalcy, he pleads guilty. The fear of law overpowers his mind. The way revenge is taken, is unlawful and it would create a confusion and anarchy. But the question arises, could that be avoided or did he have other means to seek justice? The writer's heart bleeds for Sukru and his family. But even writer's consciousness does not allow him to go unpunished. He has to surrender himself which he and his two sons do accordingly. The writer's concern is to understand Freudian uncanny behaviour which states whenever the level of repression become unbearable there will be a violent return in terms of a psychological catharsis. An excerpt from the text *Paraja* reads as below:

It was only when the blood spurted into their faces and eyes that they came to their senses. By this time their clothes were soaked with blood, the axes in their hands were dripping...father and sons put their arms around each other and wept, their tears mingling with the blood (Paraja 373).

Although the novel was written in pre-independence India, yet the sociological and philosophical debate it raises is still relevant and contemporary. This is because the novel *Paraja* has kept the issue alive down the ages. It is more than mere an anthropological documentation. It serves as a non-official way to keep the history alive which is a way to contest the official version of the history. Mohanty here attempts to present 'her-story' instead of 'HISTORY' –the story of nature versus culture; tribal versus civil. Sukru Jani is not only the primitive man ambushed by the parasitical Sahukar; he is also the quintessential man, undertaking heroic but a futile war against the tyranny of a predatory Government system. His struggle is constant and eternal.

Mohanty presents him pure and pristine in his approach towards life. Unfortunately, he is too naïve to understand outside world and its chaotic order but he is content to understand the bewildering mass of hills and forests and above all the limitless sky His thatched hut had a single room divided into three compartments –full of darkness. The central room served both as the living room and the store. In a corner of the room there lies a heap of mango seeds and the food grains in the room are scattered on the mud floor. The things have been thrown here and there. In fact, the scene is very messy and chaotic but he likes it as he is familiar with this disorder. He likes the smoke emanating from the small chimney in his home. The home has no window and there is not even a chink in the walls but there is enough space to breathe and live in. He loves his home because everything lying there belongs to him. It is his existential space. Certainly, his fight in the novel is neither not for a piece of land nor for supremacy over acquisition of land. The entirety of his struggle finds the meaning in his quest for an intimate space/*home*: a dwelling place, a shelter where he could rest after doing day in day out labour as evident in the lines given below:

[...] the land to him was not merely a patch of earth – it was part of his body. He knew every contour and depression in the land; every thorn, every ant-hill had a history [...] he had told his children: Remember, the earth is your mother (ibid. 193).



The novel underscores that the value of land that feeds tribal communities is invaluable. In fact, they consider the little land in their possession as their mother or an honor bestowed upon them by their ancestors. Then, how could one bear the betrothal of one's mother before his eyes? How could one think of peace when one's daughter is auctioned? The most important relationship among tribals is kinship. They have a relation of kinship with their space, family, rivers, trees, land and sky. They cannot afford any humiliation to their relationship. The *Parajas* are stoic and hard as rocks to retaliate when they feel that their dignity is at stake. They can go to any extent to preserve the dignity of their lives, land and culture. Thus the novel raises a very touching theme of the 'existential space' or the idea of 'home'. Their insurgency and retaliation can be interpreted as a way of registering their protest.

Mohanty highlights the tragedy of common man through character portrayal of Sukru Jani. He is an illiterate but sincere man. He does not understand that cutting down trees without prior approval by the Government is a punishable offence. He takes it for granted as he assumes his right on forests. Illegal distillation of liquor from Mahua flowers can send him behind the bars beyond his apprehension. He thinks whatever misery he has to face is the impact of some evil stars instead of his wrong doings. It is a highly pathetic that he faces trial in a Kafkaesque manner. His constant suffering and his relentless effort to fight the situation goes in vain. He accepts slavery to Sahukar because he is under the impression that he is following his dharma. For he had taken money from Sahukar, he is committed to work for him entire life. He believes that Sahukar did not force him rather he went to him by choice. He could not look through the dark benevolence of Sahukar, village Headman and forest guard. His only saving is tenacity to accommodate the adversity. The only escape they could possibly have from the fatigue of day's hard work and oppression was the liquor from fermented mahua flowers. It is their only comfort and solace:

[...] liquor was such an important part of life here that a tribesman would rather forgo a meal than a bottle of pungent mahua wine. The tribesman needed liquor not only to propitiate his gods but also to drown his hunger and misery (Paraja 98).

To add to their grievances, the law is blind. It cannot feel the inhuman behaviour and psychological exploitation of the poor people. It just requires evidence to prove one's innocence. If one does not observe the law, he will be punished by it ignorant tribal or corrupt landlord. It does not spare anyone. But people who are involved in politics and have money and power; they manipulate law according to their comfort. In fact, law is binding to poor and working class only. Their vulnerability does not have any cure. Tribes are vulnerable to dreaded 'Saltu' –the Salt and Excise Department as it is known among the tribes. Whenever an official gets any information related to illegal distillation of liquor being carried out in the forest, they follow a thorough search of all huts and surrounding patches of jungle for contraband liquor. What happens thereafter is classified. The officials demand favour to set them free. They look for money and sexual gratification. They have their henchman such like Kau paraja who asks village headman for tribal girls and women to appease the carnal hunger of the officials.

If they refuse officials to take orders, revenge is sought as happened in the case of Sukru Jani. In fact, it is done in the name of official duty. Then, the officials record their statements and the interesting fact is that they do not record as per inquiry. The accused is given a list of thorough confessions and is expected to put a thumb impression on that as per the wish of government officials. "They were required to declare that everything recorded had been read out and explained to them (accused); but few had any real idea of what was happening" (101). At the end of the day, they reached the Sahukar's home. There was no need to explain the purpose of their visit to Sahukar. It was too simple and obvious; they will spend rest of their lives as bonded labors in the service of landlord Sahukar Bisoi.

Sukru Jani draws an inference that law has become a *keep* (emphasis added) of Sahukar and powerful people in the village of Sarsupdar. For them legal trial is nothing but a ritual more horrific than the landlord's torture. Although he is ashamed of violating the law, yet it cannot be used as an excuse and the law will take its course. However, the legal system is introduced to prevent injustice yet the very idea of court, magistrate, and prison was enough to scare them eternally: "anyone who goes to jail is forever stamped a criminal, and ostracized" (104). In a similar situation, when Mandia, the eldest son, was caught red handed with pots of contraband liquor, was presented before the magistrate in the court; the magistrate asked him certain questions which could not understand. He stared at the magistrate with the dumb eyes as if he knew the reply which was expected of him, and finally he said mechanically, "Great lord, I am guilty (102)".

The trial Mohanty has presented in the novel, echoes Frantz Kafka's *The Trial*. The court finds Mandia guilty and levies a heavy fine of fifty rupees which aggravated the problem. The ritual goes on. Mandia could see the bare fields beyond the court compound. These fields do not belong to him but make him sad. He feels himself an outcaste. He makes a plea to court for extra time to pay the fine but before that he had to execute a bail bond. After many legal obstacles he is allowed to go home. He is like an Oak tree seared by lightning: the life-fluid had dried up inside, though there were no visible signs of damage outside. The future is ruined. The last hope to accumulate the money for bride-price is vaporized. Kajodi, his love, was no longer even in his dreams. From the moment of trial, he had been on the trajectory of being *goti* what he could anticipate. The world before him is in black and white. It is the time for his family –father Sukru and brother Tikra, to go back to Sahukar Bisoi's house as they need debt to pay the fine imposed on Mandia. The very plight of the family is captured by the novelist in following lines:



There was no question of Mandia's not paying the fine and going to prison. For the ignorant tribesman, there is no terror greater than the terror of the prison: It is altogether beyond his comprehension, for it belongs to a system in which he has no part, though he lives on its fringes (104).

However, the reader is drifted away by the beauty and inherent survival instinct of the people living in Sarsupadar. Mohanty maintains a balance between life and death, joy and sorrows while depicting the enigma of 'tribal-belt'. The stark realism of their lives is their death which is noted in an event during the 'Paraja Spring Festival'. The hunt-exercise is not a child's play; "hunt is no camera-inviting safe safari" (Kumkum Yadav 143). The presence of the 'relics' is axiomatic: two wooden staves on a heap of stones, commemorating the killing of a cowherd by the tiger. There are descriptions of the heart-chilling horror in the tiger gripping. It is not easy even to visualize the fight between a man and the predatory animal.

Fictional reportages showcase the arbitrary use of power in the 'tribal-belt' which is thought -provoking. It is revealed how the simple tribes are exploited by the government officials, money lenders like Ramachandra Bisoi, the forest guard, the revenue officer, the police and the court people. Their fear of police, court, prison and the government system, is milked by their own people and community. Sukru Jani and his community know nothing of soil conservation or the effects of destroying forests. Their illiteracy and ignorance robs them. Their imaginations are wild and primitive. They live a pure and pristine life. For them the vastness of the forest is life-giving. They worship it. The two ends of their lives are surrounded by forests as "Sukru Jani knew nothing of soil conservation or the danger of destroying forests. Such consideration never entered his head. He was concerned with the present." (23).

Nevertheless, the small existential needs force them (tribal people) to violate law for which they offer bribe to the forest guard. But, forest guards milks their situation and he allowed Sukru Jani to clean the land for cultivation. When he goes to the forest guard and asks him for land in favour; he has to offer him two fat hens and three big jackfruits. He falls down at his feet and grumbles for a piece of land. Sukru Jani, prostrated himself before the guard. It is a way that people of his tribe always follow on such occasions of favour from the forest guard. Unfortunately, embattled Sukru could not sense the trap lay-down by the forest guard. He took that for granted. He is too naïve to know the repercussion of such a small favour by an official. Now, he is in the mouth of death. The forest guard is a corrupt man of high degrees: "But the Forest Guard had eyes only for the parade of bathing beauties under the waterfall (24)". The forest guard is a lecherous. His intention behind the permission to Sukru for clearing the jungle is explicit in his dialogue: "He winked at Sukru Jani and coming closer said: 'I have given you what you wanted, the old man; next time I come back, will you give me what I shall ask?'" (20).

Finally, it is clear that the writer's perception of the 'tribal-belt' is guided by his own first-hand experience. His characters may display 'primitive' behaviour, but they also suffer the same existential crisis that a reader has to face. The writer, in this way, blends conventional realism with the romantic approach to explode the stereotypes. The writer takes a psychological peep into the lives of tribal community of Sarsupadar village. He asserts their liveliness as per circumstances they are playful, witty and wise despite their poverty and illiteracy. Mohanty's character Jili is bold enough to give the befitting reply to the guard. She represents the tribal ethos. She is witty and spontaneous. She tells the guard, "no girl of the hills would allow herself to be beaten by anybody in a skirmish of wit of any kind" (25). But the lust-ridden official has ill-thoughts. He tries to molest Jili and follows her like a bird-catcher. Naïve Jili is ignorant of the fact that her disapproval of the forest guard would invite his wrath upon the whole community. She chides the guard. Humiliated forest guard warns the Jili and Bili: "Tell your father, when he comes home, he added, 'that it was I, the Forest Guard, the Officer, who came here in his absence'" (28). It was this revenge which would befall on Sukru Jani, his family and his community. Although Sukru Jani sends a hard message to forest guard by beating his messenger Kau Paraja, yet the political repercussions of that assault are overwhelming to his mind as he asks to himself: "Where will it end?" (31).

The setting of the novel operates on two levels. First, it addresses the various issues related to territory. It enumerates the problems –environmental and legal, displacement and development, power and poverty, as subjects that demand attention with relation to tribal life and existence. In the course of the fictional representation, the novel accosts the issues which are real – tribal identity, location and its politics, poor economy, and mass unemployment. Each one of the issues is peculiar to the site of resistance –to say, the landscape of 'tribal-belt'. 'tribal-belt' has its own ecology which is being perturbed by the outside invasion. Mohanty's reportage is not merely theoretical but existential and practical. Moreover, the space of 'tribal-belt' has emerged as the major character in fictional portrayal of tribal life.

The second, the treatment of the site is broad and descriptive in manner and style, and in size and scale. Mohanty tries to delineate a pictorial as well as an anthropomorphic account of tribal landscape as they exist and situated in the tribal village of Sarsupadar, in Koraput, in the Eastern Ghats –the habitat of 'tribal-belt'. It also attempts to underline the life in woods –the mountains, hills, plains, bushes, flowers and fauna, information about ethnography, details about neighboring villages, tribal customs and laws, language and literature, myths and legends, festivals and rituals, beliefs and superstition, the myriad colors of tribal life, their sorrows and joys, culture and nature and above all their innocence and combative nationalism.

All these details form a living organism, a coherent web of existence –an existence which is full of meaning. In some cases, particularly in case of official representation of the 'tribal-belt' it is noted that hegemonic discourse constructs an image of the



tribal people and then freezes it, afterwards anticipating its fellows to conform to that image. The writer challenges such frozen-images of the 'tribal-belt' through his literary-account. Finally, it may be said that Mohanty's portrayal of tribal world is formidable for its conventional realism.

The writer has re-written tribal history through representation of his characters as victims of both external and internal invasion (state and local landlords). Mohanty's endeavour is to communicate the plight of the *adivasi* communities. He offers an extensive detail on tribal culture, custom, beliefs, life style and the suffering that the inhabitants has to go through in the malign process of development and modernization. Also, the literary accounts aim at to expose the process how mainstream culture theorizes the native population as *habitual offenders*. Within this context, *Paraja* is not mere a piece of prose-writing to entertain its reader but a faithful representation of pitiful case of a Paraja tribe where Sukru Jani stands for the 'entirety of tribal culture'. Keeping in the view, Mohanty's genuine attempt to re-write the history of tribal people, it can be said that Mohanty has successfully presented the contrasting images of native people in contrast with the official history of the tribal people.

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