

The Tribal and its Portrayal: A Comparative Study of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* and Kamala Markandaya's *The Coffer Dams*

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ABSTRACT:

India is the amalgamation of various customs, religions, rituals, lifestyles, languages and people. The literature of the country also emphasizes this aspect of diversity and struggles of the survival of all these classes of people. The struggles of such people will be impractical if the actually marginalized people – the tribal – will not get their survival rights. Due to the interference of the outer society, the primitive tribal ways of these people are changing. The aim of the present paper is to comparatively present the quintessence of the tribal life and its devastation with the intervention of the non – tribal and the outer system as presented in the novel *Paraja* by Gopinath Mohanty – the winner of the first ever Sahitya Akademi award – and *The Coffer Dams* by Kamala Markandaya.

Key Words: Tribal, Survival, Indian English Literature, marginalization, primitive people

Introduction:

India is geographically divided into three regions: the northern mountains, the Indo – Gangetic plain and the peninsula. The mountain and plateau of central India got bypassed by the settlers and travelers for many centuries due to its dense forests. The country is inhabited by many societies ranging from simple organization to the complex one. The society was categorized in the list of hunter – gatherers, pastoralists, peasants and townsmen belonging to different ecological regions. Central India was regarded as the major habitat of the 'tribal societies' and forest dwellers though they were scattered over the whole subcontinent. The population of such forest dwellers varies from about a hundred to a million. Forest was the only resource for their livelihood and so they defended their territory when the nearby cultivators started clearing the forests. They were also demonized or projected as supernatural beings many a times because of this which later on alienated them from the caste society. The conventional description of such forest dwellers is that they are stocky in build, dark in complexion with bloodshot eyes and speak strange language. Their religion was largely animistic and their isolation permitted them to use their own language.

Awareness of such groups is apparent from earlier sources and they were not entirely excluded from the mainstream human environment and activities. The examples of aborigines are found in Rigveda, Ramayana, Mahabharata as well as in Ruskin Bond's 'The Tiger in the Tunnel', Arun Joshi's 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' (1971) Kamala Markandaya's 'The Coffer Dams' (1969), Manohar Malgonkar's 'The Princes' (1963), Kiran Desai's 'The

Inheritance of Loss' (2006), Geeta Mehta's 'A River Sutra' (1993), Gujarati writer Dhruv Bhatt's 'That Thou Art – Tatvamasī' (1998) and 'Timirpanthi' (2015) and Gopinath Mohanty's 'Dadi Budha' (1944), 'Paraja' (1945) and 'Amrutara Santana' (1947) etc. Gopinath Mohanty is the winner of the first ever Sahitya Akademi Award for his novel *Amrutara Santana* – a well-known writer, researcher and compiler of Oriya tribes. His novel *Paraja* received rave reviews in India and abroad after its English translation by Bikram K. Das. The novel depicts the primitivism of Paraja tribe and is set in the colonial period. Kamala Markandaya is an established Indian English author. Her novel *The Coffey Dams* is set in independent India focusing on the advent of modernism in the tribal area. The present paper is intended to juxtapose the civilized non – tribal society with the primitive tribal society. There is always an exchange of culture and systems as the tribal have come under the influence of modernism and money but the non – tribal societies have not yet accepted the rich cultural values of the primitives. This study implicates the quintessence of the tribal life and its devastation with the intervention of the non – tribal and the outer system.

Comparative Literature:

The term '*literature compare*' was coined in the year 1816 by Noel and Laplace. In 1897, a chair of comparative literature was established in Lyon which made it an academic discipline. Comparative literature is the study of literature across cultures and nations. It is a kind of interdisciplinary approach of studying literature which includes the acquaintance with translation studies, sociology, critical theory, cultural studies, religious studies and history. The main concern of studying comparative literature is to study the patterns of connection in literature across national borders, across time periods, across languages, across genres, across boundaries between literature and the other arts (music, painting, dance, film, etc.) across disciplines (literature and psychology, philosophy, science, history, architecture, sociology, politics, etc.). There are mainly six schools of Comparative Literature i.e. French, American, Indian, British, African and Chinese. Among these the French school, the American school and the Indian school are considered the major schools of the discipline differing in their approach of literature. The discipline has many scholarly associations like ICLA (International Comparative Literature Association), BCLA (British Comparative Literature Association) and ACLA (American Comparative Literature Association).

Paraja and *The Coffey Dams* – A Comparative Analysis:

Both the novels taken into consideration here *Paraja* (1946) and *The Coffey Dams* (1969) deal with the tribal ethos and pathos. Both the novels share the qualities of primitive tribal life and the interruption of an outsider to disrupt their being. Both novelists voice the marginalized people's plight and sympathizes with them. The tribal people have remained marginalized from the main stream society and very few writers have given them some space in their literary output. The writers in consideration of the present research put forth a viewpoint that these people should be treated regardless of race, class or color discrimination.

Gopinath Mohanty's telling is not mere imaginative narrative but his own experience. As a government official he lived in the area where *Paraja* is set and initially wrote a short story on the incident which he came to know from an inspector but later developed into a novel where he gives more space to the tribal ethics and customs. Mohanty depicts the detailed account of daily routine, festivals, hunting, occupation, farming, love making,

usurpation, slavery and endurance of the Paraja tribal. There are minute details of how the huts look, the way people cook their daily meal, the knowledge of farming and land and the seasonal troubles. The area of Koraput comes alive with the benevolent details of flora and fauna.

In comparison to Mohanty, Markandaya's narrative is little imaginary. She does not give detailed account of the lifestyle of the tribal people. But in her hands the jungle and the river both comes alive with vivid imagery. The tribal settlement she depicts is through the excursions of Helen into jungle. Thus, her depiction of tribal is through the eyes and interpretation of an Englishwoman. Helen finds the exasperation of the primitive ways and a 'glancing blow of social change' in the people. The lifestyle of people surprises her more due to its sameness rather than the difference. Helen sees women sitting in the sun pounding the grain or kneading dough. The men of the village seem, '...unable to hunt, forbidden to fish in the requisitioned river, unable to find work with the Company – squatted round a cockpit, grooming bright feathered, peppery little game cocks.' (*The Coffer Dams* 71) Both the novels share similarities and differences in the depiction of tribal and their ethos. The comparative arguments are as following:

Defilement of Tribal Values and System:

Paraja is the novel about the Paraja tribe residing near the Koraput district of Southern Orissa. The plot of the novel comprises the tribal family and its disintegration as the major episode. There are events which leads the meek people towards the possession of materialistic life as the outer society does. Sukru Jani, the patriarch, dreams of acquiring new land for his sons which leads him to the Forest guard and then to the Sahukar Ramchandra Bisoi. Both these people are outsiders and violate the family's very existence. His elder daughter Jili succumbs to the pleasures of youth and materialistic fulfillments which breaks her father's moral esteem. The tribal people in the novel are possessed by the natural law and lifestyle but with the entry of forest guard and with the imposition of fine on Sukru Jani for cutting down the trees the family ruins. It is natural tribal system to select a patch of forest and cut down the trees so that to make it farming land. But the forest guard is an outsider living and imposing the non – tribal system in the area and he imposes the non – tribal court law of paying fine or going to jail for cutting down the trees from the forest. The forest is home for tribal but the forest guard rules the forest and snatches the very right of the people's living.

Another reason for the imposition of fine on Sukru is his elder daughter Jili's resistance to the forest guard's physical needs. The people do not possess the sexual taboos but there is never the option of forceful sex or sex trade. The forest guard wants to violate the natural sexual freedom of the tribal girl Jili to his lusty civilized desires. Jili's resistance to his abuses makes him jealous and defeated. Thus, the anger of Jili's refusal turns to the imposition of fine on her father due to the forest guard's forgery which leads Sukru Jani to borrow from Sahukar Ramchandra Bisoi – another outsider who also violates the tribal life. The same violation happens with Mandia – the elder son of Sukru Jani – as he is caught red handed while distilling liquor which is the important part of tribal life style. But the outer law considers the distillation and consumption of liquor as an offensive act which puts forth Mandia Jani into the life long struggle of *gotihood*.

The people do not possess the knowledge of written documents while selling or buying land as they consider the natural properties communal. The Sahukar takes advantage of the tribal man's ignorance about the documentation procedure every time. He cheats them while making ledgers when they come to borrow from him and in process becomes the owner of their very life and existence because the people call on Dharmu – the Just One as their witness for selling the land or borrowing from him. This is natural tribal rule but it is violated by the outsiders to forge them.

The Coffer Dams depicts tribal in a little modern way in comparison to Mohanty's *Paraja* as the tribals in the novel are not much primitive and ignorant. Here the violation of the tribal system occurs with the entrance of British engineering firm and the subsequent process of modernization. The tribals in the novel are not dependent upon the forest resources for their livelihood but are employed as the laborers to the dam construction site. There are only two tribal characters in the novel: Bashiam – the tribal engineer and the tribal headman. The role of Bashiam is important throughout the novel as he represents the modern civilized youth born out of tribal primitivism.

The character of Bashiam is not ignorant enough to be dependent upon the traditional forest resource but gets education and turns to the technical occupation. Other tribal men from his clan also turn to the money-making option of being a laborer. Bashiam's occupation shows his deprivation from his traditional attitude and even the furniture within his hut shows how his primitivism is altered. Capitalism enters into the primitive lifestyle of tribal people. The dam construction affects the people gravely as with the arrival of British the people are forced to move from their ancestral land, their fishing occupation is also interrupted due to the dam construction and the blasting and technical faults kill the tribal laborers in abundance.

In both the ways, what the people face is 'disintegration' and 'violation' not only of their existing system but also of their very being. The superiority of one class over the other plays a vital role in the marginalization of tribals and their customs.

Knowledge and Illiteracy:

The *Paraja* depicts the illiteracy of the tribal people about law and education system which plays a vital role in their destruction. When Sukru Jani borrows from Sahukar his agony is multiplied as he is unaware of the ledger that the Sahukar keeps and changes according to his own wishes to forge the tribal people. The officialdoms are also bribed by him. Sahukar snatches Sukru's land for which Sukru goes to the court of law but again this does not help them as they are ignorant of the dates and documentation of the court of law. Not once but every time the tribal are forged by the non-tribal system in the novel.

In *The Coffer Dams*, the tribal man Bashiam is a technical engineer, an educated man. He works as a crane operator at the dam building site. The reason for his marginalization is his knowledge as his contact with outer civilization and education turns him away from his own primitive lifestyle which makes him an outsider in his own community, while the non – tribal considers him a 'junglywallah'. Thus, both knowledge and illiteracy play a vital role in their ruin and marginalization.

Slavery and Employment:

Paraja depicts Sukru and his family's *gotihood* – a bonded laborer until the payment of the borrowed amount – in Sahukar's house and are treated as slaves. They are given 'half a putti of mandia once a month for his food and one blanket worth one rupee once a year in winter' and the slave is supposed to be 'the whole time servants and laborers' doing 'all jobs for him as he may direct, at all hours of the night and the day, and at any place where he may require them to work.' (*Paraja* 51)

The slaves are molested at any time and in several ways and at last the Sahukar usurps their lands and makes them his slaves for the whole life. Jili and Bili – Sukru Jani's daughters – seek employment at the road construction but in no time, they fall into the sexual entrapments of their bodies by the contractors and other workers.

The Coffey Dams also depicts this aspect of employment and laborers as the novel is set on a dam construction site where many workers are appointed to carry out the work. The tribal in the area opt for money and diverts from their traditional resources, making them totally dependent on their earning at the construction site. They die many a times at site due to technical faults which makes their wives and children hopeless. Clinton's anti tribal attitude even rejects the dispensation of the dead bodies and instead offers to 'incorporate' them into the structure.

Both the novels depict the aspect of slavery and employment and their treatments. The outsiders offer money which is never considered the part of the primitive lifestyle. The women are not only employed but also sexually exploited and the reason for this condition of the tribal is their poverty where the outsider enters and ruins the tribal world without offering anything worthwhile in return.

Coupling of Tribal with non – Tribal:

The tribal world is free from sexual taboos as they have a dormitory system where the youngsters can achieve intimate pleasures without the interference or the fear of the world. This freedom is taken for granted by the outsiders as the forest guard asks Jili – Sukru Jani's elder daughter – to fulfill his desires which is unacceptable to Jili because the tribal system gives them a freedom of choice to have a partner and not to be slave to the physical attraction of others. The Sahukar not only usurps Sukru's land but also his daughter Jili as she is left by Bagala – who once loved her and betrothed her. Jili accepts this as Sahukar becomes so docile to her on bed which prompts her to surrender herself to him. The Sahukar does not love her but still gives her a house with facilities and this temptation ruins Jili and her whole family. In *The Coffey Dams*, Helen – an Englishwoman and Clinton's wife – is attracted towards the coarse flavors of Bashiam. Her husband is not able to physically satisfy her due to his aged body that encourages her to achieve it from Bashiam's strong body. Bashiam does not merely satisfy her physical needs but is also able to satiate her emotionally which her husband lacks in abundance. Moreover, both are rebellious in nature – Bashiam rebels to tribal lifestyle whereas Helen defies the sophisticated lifestyle of English memsahibs. In *Paraja* it is Jili's attraction towards the materialistic life that joins her with Sahukar compromising her own actual peaceful happiness. In *The Coffey Dams* it is Helen's refusal to the materialistic and sophisticated life that makes her choose Bashiam – a tribal – to satisfy her needs.

Conclusion:

Both the novels depict ethos and pathos of tribes along with the usurpation of the outer world but still after all the troubles and ruins what remains is the essence and endurance of the tribal. In *Paraja*, the tribal endures the usurpation of Sahukar, lust of forest guard, forgery of their own people, indifference of the non – tribal law towards them, interference of outsiders in their society and implications of non -tribal law upon them. When Sukru Jani and his sons are not able to regain their essential peaceful state with the help of court law and requests to the Sahukar himself they kill him with the blow of their axe and then surrenders themselves to the policeman confessing their sin. The novel is open ended. The author does not give the result of the tribals surrender to the policeman. At the end there are no oppressors or the oppressed as everyone is lured by the materials and money at some stage in their existence. In *The Coffey Dams* Bashiam's character shows the endurance and essence of the tribal life albeit in the light of modernization. Bashiam is an educated tribal man but yet his temperaments are nurtured by the root culture of his birth. His profession as a technician puts him in the non – tribal world but there even he is taunted and is unexpected by other Indians and British. He is enduring his loneliness where nothing comes to aid him neither his tribal world nor the educated and sophisticated non – tribal world. Only Helen shows some interests in him as she herself is lacking the physical and emotional satisfaction. After the accident Bashiam's body disfigures which unties the interest of Helen in him and she again becomes the loyal wife of Clinton. Thus, Bashiam is in a way left to endure his double marginalized and remains 'a nowhere man'. Bashiam's essence lies in his spirits of primitivism, self – esteem and self – dependence which he holds till the last breath. His dignity is the pure illustration of magnificent qualities of Indian tribals. He proves himself the noble civilized man in comparison to the Clinton's cruel character.

Thus, both the novelists have succeeded in the depiction of essential qualities of Indian tribal people. Though they are marginalized, slaved and usurped the essential primitivism and endurance born out of natural living style guides them and places them superior to any outer social strata.

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