

Excruciating Tale of Women and Nature: An Ecofeminist Study of Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja and Pratibha Ray's The Primal Land in Translation

Ms. Juhee Panda¹, Dr. Mukesh Tiwari²

¹Research Scholar, Department of H.S.S., C.V. Raman Global University, Email: juheepanda@gmail.com

²Assistant Professor of English, C.V. Raman Global University, Email: mukeshtiwari@cgu-odisha.ac.in

Abstract

Ecofeminism posits that environmental degradation and patriarchal oppression are deeply interconnected, this philosophy emphasises the ways both nature and women are treated by patriarchal society. Ecofeminists examine the effect of gender categories in order to demonstrate the ways in which social norms exert unjust dominance over women and nature. Through a critical examination of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*; which details extensive deforestation and Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land*, which brings forth the exploitation of women and nature in the mountainous region. This paper explores how external ecological intrusion exacerbates the systemic marginalisation of tribal women. The study analyses and demonstrates how the destruction of natural habitats directly intensifies the socio-economic subjugation of indigenous women. It foregrounds how corporate and residential encroachment on forest lands mirrors the systemic exploitation of indigenous women, who bear the primary burden of tribal labour. The study explores the intertwining of the accelerating destruction of natural ecosystems and how it directly compounds the marginalisation and suffering of vulnerable female population.

Keywords: Ecofeminism, Nature, Exploitation, Women, Paraja tribe and Bonda tribe.

Introduction

Le féminisme ou la mort (Feminism or Death), written by Françoise d'Eaubonne in 1974, is credited with popularising the term 'ecofeminism'. According to Vandana Shiva, ecofeminists hold a view that "the marginalisation of women and the destruction of nature are linked to the rise of reductionist science and industrial capitalism. This masculine model of science and economic development views nature and women as passive objects to be exploited for profit" (Staying Alive 14). Ecological feminism or ecofeminism started first as a series of protests in United States as a branch of feminism which deals with oppression of women and nature collectively. According to a prominent Ecofeminist, Ecofeminism 'developed as a concept in the 1970s' and there have been 'arguably major policy shifts in the fields of gender inequality and environmental sustainability' (Susan 2004). The subjection and repression being age old practice has its roots in mythology and scriptures. The earliest blueprint can be traced in ancient epic Mahabharat where Draupadi was mercilessly disrobed in the Kaurava court by Dushasana who tears off her clothes in the midst of the session which made her burst into tears being manhandled, dragged into the court in a blood-stained garment. It is not only limited to Hindu mythology but has been mooted in Greek mythology too as apparent in the poem of W.B Yeats:

A sudden blow: the great wings
Beating still
Above the staggering girl, her
thighs caressed.... (1-4).

The above lines from the poem *Leda and the Swan* alludes to a Greek tale in which the god Zeus, incarnate as a swan, entices Leda and conceives her with the child who would become Helen of Troy. She was a stunningly beautiful woman who led to the Trojan War. Nature is not at anyway benefited by war, which is the result of Leda's victimisation. Like all natural disasters, wars have a profound impact on the environment and other living things. Conflicts result in the loss of life, property, habitat, and tranquility. Both the habitat and those that live there find it to be quite difficult.

Similarly, in another Greek myth, Medusa is viewed as a doomed lady whose sole flaw is her beauty. Her narrative begins when all men claimed her after she became prepossessed. Being a virgin and devout woman, she was tasked with serving Athena. Poseidon, the Sea God once entered the temple and swept her away, destroying all of

her dignity and honour. As evident in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Book-4:

She, it's said, was violated in Minerva's [Athena's] shrine by the Lord of the Sea...
Jove's daughter turned away and covered with her shield her virgin's eyes. And
then for fitting punishment transformed the Gorgo's lovely hair to loathsome
snakes (790-803).

After discovering the truth, Athena was forced to support Poseidon, forbidding Medusa from having hair and punishing her with a hideous physique and venomous snakes. Anyone who sees her will be turned into a block according to the curse. Both nature and women are regarded as the pinnacles of beauty. It would be difficult for them to accept and maintain themselves if these virtues were stolen.

Ecofeminism in Literary and Cultural Discourse

Several contemporary writers have conveyed their interest in environment and other ecological studies, to foreground issues like global rise in temperature, major climatic changes, pollution, ozone layer depletion, etc. Some writers view the subjugation on nature and women as equal since nature is also considered as 'mother'. Some post-colonial ecofeminist texts like Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) emphasise the strength of a woman struggling with forces beyond her control. The author vividly paints the picture of vandalising and suffering of nature and women in the hands of patriarchal forces. In the view of Carolyn Merchant, Ecofeminism emerged as a 'radical new language' that women needed amidst oppression and exploitation' (23). Numerous scholarly publications have examined ecofeminism, a viewpoint that links the dominance of women with the dominance of nature. Ecofeminist theory posits that patriarchal systems drive environmental degradation by equating the exploitation of nature with the oppression of women. Key foundational thinkers, including Françoise d'Eaubonne, Carolyn Merchant, and Val Plumwood, argue that dismantling dualisms, such as nature-versus-culture and male-versus-female, is essential for ecological survival. Françoise d'Eaubonne (*Le féminisme ou la mort*) coined the term "ecofeminism," arguing that patriarchal overpopulation and resource destruction directly threaten human survival. Carolyn Merchant (*The Death of Nature*) traces how the Scientific Revolution transformed the Earth from a living, nurturing mother into a dead, mechanical object to be dominated. Val Plumwood (*Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*) critiques Western rationalism for creating rigid dualisms like mind over body and culture over nature that justifies systemic oppression.

Gopinath Mohanty's Paraja

The literary community is familiar with Gopinath Mohanty, who has always been interested in the native people's adversities. His fascination in tribal life and culture led him to write a trilogy about it. In an effort to reach a wider audience, his tribal series *Dadi Budha* (1944), *Paraja* (1945), and *Amrutara Santana* (1947) have all been rendered into English as *The Ancestor*, *Paraja*, and *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, respectively. Mohanty's *Paraja* is representative of the plight and predicament that is commonly witnessed in the various tribes and is exemplified through the family of Sukru Jani. The novel consists of hundred fourteen chapters and is regarded as a full-fledged novel due to its structure. It is neither a tragedy nor a romance and is not limited to a tale of revenge or betrayal. The novel deals with pessimism and paints a clear picture of poor tribe's existential concern in the mind of the readers. The writer has always chosen tyrannised people as characters in his various novels. Most of his texts dwell on the marginalised section of the society that resides on the periphery. For instance, *Amrutara Santana*, talks about ingenuous Kondh tribe of Odisha and their heritage. Mohanty is a keen observer and loves to experiment with style and themes. In another novel *Harijan*, he delineates the heart-wrenching tale of the group of scavengers who are considered lowest and untouchable. In most of his texts we witness the writer upholding the exploited people to amend the existing social order. In *Paraja*, he encapsulates *Paraja* tribe and their tussle for survival amidst modernity and changes. It can be considered as 'the most lyrical, poignant and soul-stirring for its realistic portrayal of human pathos' (Bodhale 66).

Tribal Life and Cultural Representation in Paraja

Mohanty's novel is a socio-ethnographic document detailing not only the mode of living of the tribe, but also concentrate on their cultural taboos, superstitions, rituals, religion, and marriage. According to researcher Dr. B. Bodhale, tribes are considered to be one of 'the most primitive groups in the history of humanity' who are marked

by 'a rich cultural heritage' deeply incorporated in their 'languages, traditions, customs, rituals, beliefs, folklores and their own civilization, they are still far away from the mainstream developed societies' (66). The novel sheds light on the strange customs of the tribes living in mountainous region of Koraput. The hilly area of Koraput has the secrets of the tribe buried in its bosom. What makes the novel outstanding is the setting itself which speaks volume about the text. Here, nature acts as a living entity which not only helps in character development but also in the progression of the story. Sarsupadar district is illustrated in the first chapter which portrays Sukru Jani dwelling in the hamlet of Sarsupadar with his family. As Tehseen puts forth in her book review of Paraja, the novel is 'an ode to the Paraja tribe living in the hamlets across Eastern Ghats, the roads that link to the towns of Koraput and Rayagada'. The narrow dusty roads of the village, trees placed on both the sides, thatched roof and plantation extending to vast acres of land unveils deep secrets of the tribe and their disparate culture. It paints an evocative picture of the tribe living in harmony 'amidst nature, hills, and valleys before outsiders'.

Nature as Living Presence in Paraja

The term Paraja refers to common people of Paraja tribes who are gullible as compared to other tribes and are totally ignorant of law and order due to which they are often duped by Sahukars, landlords and government officials. At the onset of the narrative, everything goes competently. Mohanty describes how Sukru Jani and his family members live imperturbably amidst nature. Their main business is agriculture and so they are petty farmers who acquire a livelihood through harvest. As put forth by Savita Kumari:

The family headed by Sukru Jani is representative of other several families who depend on agriculture, hard labour and sleepless nights always thinking about tomorrow and several problems and difficulties they will have to face with the rise of the sun (274).

Since these tribes are encircled by forests, they extract natural resources from it like leaves, vegetables, and wood for cooking. Their food culture is quite simple as evident in the simple eating habit of Sukru Jani whose "needs are simple; a bowl of mandia gruel every morning and again in the evening" (Paraja 2). They prefer mandia gruel (Ragi) as it keeps them brimmed and zestful all day. They also nourish upon gurdi leaves and mango seed powder. They are totally dependent on forest for their livelihood as depicted by the author. The tribe known as Paraja lives in the Koraput district of Sarsupadar, neighboured by hills. The Odia term "Paraja," which means "ordinary" or "plain people," is the source of the tribe's name. Particularly through the patriarch Sukru Jani and his family, the story addresses the victimisation of the aboriginals.

The venerable father Sukru Jani, his two young sons Mandia and Tikira, and his two young daughters Jili and Bili make up the text's cast of characters. Long ago, Jani's wife Sombari was abducted by a tiger. The family lived a happy life until a hostile eye of fiendish and barbaric Forest Guard falls on one of the daughters of Jani and the whole world of Jani capsizes. At the beginning of the text, Mohanty draws an enchanting picture of the village and its landscape: "Viewed from the winding road on the fearsome mountains- a pass known as the 'Dharam Dooar' – The Gate of Truth" (Paraja1). There is a spiritual tone attached to the elucidation as one can peruse through the lines. The village road that leads to the mountain is the 'Gate of Truth' as said in Odia 'Dharam Dooar'. People of the tribe always revered nature as God and supreme. According to Hindu philosophy, one has to pass several tests of patience and virtue in order to cross 'The Gate of Truth' which ultimately leads to heaven. It is a general belief amongst the indigenous people who considered village no less than Elysium and reveling in the lap of nature. They are true to their commitment towards motherland. Nature is always analogous to the notions like purity, holy, divine, beauty, etc. as being referred to in the lines of the English poet Wordsworth:

This sea that bares her bosom to the moon;
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are up-gathered how like sleeping flowers (5-7).

In the above lines, the speaker narrates the hypnotic charms of nature. There is personification used to relate with each description. 'Howling' paints nature with some human emotion. The flowers falling asleep like any human being adds phenomenal beauty to the lyric. All the charms and beauty of nature can be attached with women as both possess beauty and the power of creation. Humans count nature as their mother, thereby imparting it a female identity. Any ignominy to female would be dishonour to nature too. Most of the ecofeminist texts deal with correspondence of destruction of nature and oppression of women. It is a comprehensive study that seeks to restore balance to the world in terms of equality of gender and creating a sustainable planet. It also makes the

case that because both the exploitation of nature and the subjugation of women thrive in patriarchal societies, they are related.

The majority of ecofeminists contend that gender conceptions based on hierarchical structures and dualistic values, as well as prevalent societal value systems, are responsible for the dual suppression of women and nature (Warren1997). It helps in revaluing typical feminine qualities like love, care, beauty, intuition, etc. which are often overlooked in masculinist culture. Eco-feminists also take into consideration the influence of ecological degradation on women especially from downtrodden communities and strongly supports ecological justice. And not only that it also challenges patriarchal systems which prevail since long and ultimately results in both environmental degradation and inequality of gender in the society. The ultimate aim of eco-feminism is to restore order in the society through promotion of sustainable and equitable practices which will be lucrative for both society and environment.

Ecofeminism in the Indian Context

One of the key examples of eco-feminism in India can be the famous Chipko Movement which engrossed mainly on saving trees from cutting and thus ceased deforestation or massive felling of trees which has several complications on environment. In this movement, women clung to trees which saved them from parting. Apart from this there are other popular activists like Dr. Vandana Shiva, an environment activist who has thrashed out about the effect of globalisation and monoculture on both ecology and women. Shiva (1988) criticises the western intrusion on the traditional Indian modes of agriculture and modes of spending life. She supported Chipko movement with her group of women who aimed at preserving trees from chopping. According to her, all those women who showed their effort in saving trees thus preserving Prakriti which is the ultimate source of their life. Against the disjointing and dissecting of hegemonic forces, these efforts of women accentuate the special affinity and connection between nature, women, and the marginalised who seek their vigor in connectedness, unity in diversity, and spirituality (Shiva 1998). The effects of development models on women and the environment, especially in the Indian context, are frequent themes in her writing. In this field, her book *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* is a classic which dwells on these thematic elements.

Another notable social activist, Shyam Sunder Paliwal, contributes to ecological restoration by aiming to bring a balance to the ecosystem and set example for others. Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminism: Women, Culture, Nature, and Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western View of Its Definition and Significance* (2000) gives a thorough rundown of ecofeminist philosophy, covering all of its facets and examples. The convergence of ecofeminism with concerns of global justice and planetary health is the subject of Greta Gaard and Lori Gruen's work, including "Ecofeminism: Toward Global Justice and Planetary Health" (2017). The connection between eco-sufficiency and global justice is examined in Ariel Salleh's masterpiece "Eco-Sufficiency and Global Justice: Women Write Political Ecology" (2009). Ecofeminism has now emanated as a wide concept that extends beyond the essential texts and focuses on worldwide issues. It has had a big impact on environmental ethics, leading to a reassessment of conventional ethical frameworks and an increased emphasis on how humans and nature are intertwined. By addressing patriarchal systems that fuel environmental degradation and gender inequity, as well as by embracing ecological concerns, it has expanded and strengthened feminist thought. Ecofeminist concepts have influenced and enlightened a number of social groups, such as feminist, animal rights, and environmental action. By emphasising the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations, ecofeminism is becoming more and more pertinent in conversations about globalisation, development, and resource distribution aiming to accomplish global justice.

Women, Labour, and Gender Roles in the Paraja Tribe

The female characters in Paraja are sketched as paragon of beauty. The two daughters of Jani, Jili and Bili engaged in household chores paint a clear picture of entire womanhood being constricted in the Sarsupadar district of Koraput. They are described as simple yet beautiful in their own terms:

Then sits on the porch with her legs stretched out before her. Her raven black hair is oiled and combed into a smooth, slanting bun into which she has stuck a red flower (Mohanty1).

It's the daily duty of the girls to cook sitting on the porch, where a small fire smoldered, outside of the hut. Usually, Jili cooks meal with powdered mandia or mango seed flour in an earthen pot, adding a few leaves and water. During the afternoon, women bathe in the stream, washed their clothes and engaged themselves in casual talk.

Here, Mohanty is also hinting at gender roles which are already fixed in the society. The Paraja community was no exception. Women have to take care of the household, cook food for the male members and sometimes go forest for searching leaves while male members work in the field and drink liquor. In tribal communities, rules and regulations are quite stringent which everyone must follow. It was one such afternoon, Jili and Bili taking bath in the stream, caught sight of the Forest guard. Sensing danger, Jili hastily wrapped herself with the wet saree she was washing; however, the guard was out of their sight but eyeing them under cover. The Forest guard was arrested by the beauty of Jili so as he was unable to move a single inch, even if Jili evaporated from his sight as Mohanty writes:

The Forest guard stood there, nostrils distended
and never took his eyes off them until
they had disappeared (2).

Forest Exploitation and Tribal Survival

There is also citation of vast acres of land covered with dense forest and trees being hewed for the patches of cultivation and erection of houses. Forests are deemed extremely holy by the people of the tribe still they never hesitate to fell trees as they are little aware of its upshot. The father and sons “continued their work of felling trees in the jungle’ and as they worked, Sukru Jani could see his dreams of more land and many houses coming nearer” (Paraja 33). In Paraja tribe, sons after getting married have to live separately in separate rooms for which all the men start mapping out for their home. Sukru, being the governor of the family has the sole responsibility of expanding his family legacy. He is shown worried about his sons and their future. He dreams of creating his own utopia but for that he has to undergo acute drudgery. Tribal people are very conscientious and self-made when it comes to their livelihood. Sukru perturbed about the future and family expansion, worked frantically on Mali Damaka Hill to clear forest land. That was the only solution left for him as he is determined to erect his own house there. He was not alone, his sons also assisted him to clear forest making place for themselves. Mohanty writes: Father and sons would be hard at work cutting down the jungle on Mali Damaka Hill, while forest echoed to the thud of their axes (7).

Corruption, Power, and Exploitation of Tribals

These tribes as depicted by the author are totally clueless of the rules and regulations of the land. They are too credulous and fall into the trap easily, lay by government officials who take advantage of their innocence. In Paraja, we witness such scenes of ditching when the evil forest guard plays game with Sukru Jani and deliberately makes him penitent for cutting trees from the forest. In the words of the researcher Etishree Sagarika Panda:

The Forest Guard or the Garod/Jaman acts as a typical Sarkari official who is
not only assigned with the duty of collecting the newly introduced “plough tax”
but also capable of prosecuting the tribals for clearing a patch of jungle or
collecting honey from the forest without license (47).

Earlier Sukru was granted permission from the forest guard but later on he denies that he hasn’t granted any permission to Sukru just to take revenge on him as he denied him his daughter Jili. Naive Sukru and his family falls a victim to this filthy politics. Mohanty has referred Paraja tribe as stones or blocks hardly having ability to think. They strongly felt “everything that grew on hills and in the forests was theirs to use” even the impartial sunlight that shines equally and rain which knows no discrimination and the life-giving air and water too (Paraja 33). According to Srivastava and Jaiswal, “Sukru Jani is the patriarch of the Paraja tribe”. In actuality, his story is “the story of the tribe in fact of all the tribes” that formerly occupied these mountains and woodlands (561). The novel documents heart-wrenching tale dealing with the plight of the indigenous tribe which has been presented through the fictitious family of five (Sukru, his two sons and two daughters). The novel doesn’t have too many characters. Mohanty picked a handful of them to depict the destruction of tribal values and traditions. The evil forest guard growing restless at the beauty of Jili, sends one of his gotis (bonded labour) Kau Paraja to Jani’s house for the rapid progression of his desire. But to his utter disappointment, Kau returns back humiliated and thrashed by Jani, who couldn’t hear a single word about his daughter Jili. Exploitation of women whether married or unmarried was a common practice among Doms and other tribes, who felt flattered when officers asked for woman. But this was something not accepted in Paraja tribe as they believed “Paraja women are not for sale. He can have our chickens and our millets, but nothing more” (Paraja 30).

Jani's refusal through Kau evokes greater mishap from the forest guard who turns vindictive enough to take legal action against Jani, whom he had already granted permission earlier to cut forest. Ultimately, he has to pay a huge fine which he borrowed from malicious Sahukar Ramachandra Bisoi, for whom he and his sons would work as gotis till money is repaid as put forth by the researcher Sonali Ganguli:

Rama Bisoi, the money lender of the area too in a guise of a good mask man, was originally a merciless cruel beast who lent money and grain to those poverty-ridden people and exploited ... He exploited Sukru and made him and his son slaves by taking the advantage of their miserable condition (2-3).

The condition of women was no less vulnerable than forest land which was indiscriminately felled in tribal areas of Odisha. According to Suratha Kumar Malik, land alienation began during the British rule in which land was brought for agricultural commercialisation, transport enlargement and extension of English Judicial system after risking tribe's traditional mode of living. There were no strict rules then based on land alienation and commercialization so most of it was used for selling purpose. Whoever bought it, focused on construction and in this way most of the forest land was cleared in which indigenous tribes settled.

Sexual Exploitation and the Tragedy of Jili and Bili

However, Jani tries to protect his daughter but ultimately fails. After all they belong to the marginalised section, deprived of power and money. In the absence of male members in the house, Jili and Bili start working in the construction site but soon they are lured into prostitution by Supervisor and later Jili becomes the mistress of Sahukar who ruins their entire house as evident in the lines of the text:

Yes, Jili! And isn't there another Bili at home still? Bring her to me. I have taken the land; I have taken one sister; I shall take other too. I shall take your wives; I shall drive you to court to court through the length of the country (Mohanty 372).

Towards the end, the oppression of Sahukar crosses all the limits. "Everything was gone: his wife, his money, his freedom, everything; nothing remained" (Mohanty 296). Jani's land, house, sons and even daughters are taken away from him leaving him alone to suffer. Jili becomes the mistress of Sahukar despite of Jani's protest. A similar tragedy shadows the rest of the young women belonging to the Paraja tribe in the Sarsupadar district, where joy was once a shared reality. Meanwhile, the patriarchal authority wielded by Sukru Jani quickly crumbles.

Pratibha Ray: Voice of Women and Tribal Realities

Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land*, dwells on the plight and predicament Bonda tribe. Ray is one of the most applauded writers in Odia Literature. Originally from Balikuda, Jagatsinghpur, she has written a bunch of unconventional novels like *Yajnaseni* (1984), *Silapadma* (1988), *Aadibhoomi* (1993) in Odia which is later translated into English as *Yajnaseniby Pradip Bhattacharya*, *The citadel of Loveby Monalisa Jena* and *The Primal Land* by Prof. B.K. Das respectively. She touches upon various themes like social customs, plight of women, local tradition of the tribe and their gradual decomposition. Her first novel is *Barsha Basanta Baisakha* (Rain Spring Summer) which was published in 1974 is a text that conjoins women and nature by examining the profound links between female selfhood and natural world. She is honoured with the prestigious Jnanpith Award in 2011 and Padma Bhushan in 2022 for her contribution to the field of literature. She has framed 21 novels, 24 short story collections, travelogues, and other literary works including poetry collections and essays.

Myth, Feminism and Narrative Technique in Ray's Fiction

Pratibha Ray's writing style is quite unique as she often blends myth, folklore and mythology in her text which has layers of meaning as scholar Trailokya Nath Parida observes, Ray purposefully merges oral rituals, ancestral belief systems, and collective memory to chart the "persistent tension between indigenous identity and the encroaching forces of modernity" (238). Being a woman herself, she always stands with anguished women lending them a voice of protest which they mostly need as munitions in patriarchal society. Her seminal text *Yagyaseni*: The story of Draupadi is hinged on the epic Mahabharata and written from the viewpoint of the character of Draupadi for whom Mahabharat war took place. It is a key feminist text that demurrs the traditional notions of patriarchy thus imparting the female protagonist a voice of her own. *Yagyaseni* truly means someone who is born out of fire. The entire novel centers on the main female protagonist Draupadi or Panchali or Yagyaseni and her experiences

whose idea no doubt has been acquired from the ancient epic as evident in the lines of the scholar Trailokya Nath, Ray, in her noted work *Yajnaseni* (1995) reveals the story of Draupadi from the Mahabharata, not merely as a reinterpretation of myth but as a powerful medium to

extract emotional and cultural depth of women's experiences (240).

Her *Citadel of Love* takes the readers back to the bygone era when the famous Konark temple was being structured. The tale takes place in the thirteenth century, during which King Narasimha Deva was steering the construction of the Sun Temple. Unusual events transpired when a foreign visitor lands up to explore the monuments. The statue of a woman that he saw was haunting him, and he was soon taken back in time to when she was alive and the temple was still being built. Together, the past and present create an enigmatic magic realism.

Tribal Identity and Ethnographic Representations in The Primal Land

Originally penned as *Aadibhoomi*, *The Primal Land* is an anthropologic depiction of the Bonda people, who inhabited the mountains of Odisha. It addresses the theme of mistreatment and struggle for existence within the pristine boundary of nature. People of the tribe live in groups sharing common culture and belief system that not only binds them together but also imparts them with an idiosyncratic identity. According to the researcher S. Chitra and Sangay Tenzin, tribes are those people who “are perceived as primitive, illiterate, simple and backward belonging to communities positioned outside a civilization” (34). The novel takes us to the secluded hills of Koraput, where the novelist herself researched about Bonda tribe and their way of living as a part of her post-doctoral research. Bondas are a part of a larger group known as “Austroasiatic tribes” who resided “in the desolate hills of Jeypore in Malkangiri district” (Chitra and Tenzin 35). It was a formidable task as the tribes were uneducated and totally unaware of the outside world. They had raised their own world which was guarded by superstitions and blind belief, strange rituals and customs. One thing to note here is that the way of living of tribes was completely different from the way of living of the people of the mainstream. So, Ray thought of perceiving their bizarre rituals and customs and brings to the limelight. It took her years to shoot the breeze with Bonda tribe as they had their own provincial language which was quite strenuous to comprehend as scholar Monalisa Chakrabarty observes, Ray spent years navigating the strenuous barriers of the Remo dialect to ensure her text bypassed superficial tokenism. Her physical, empirical findings were first structured non-fictionally in her diary *Bonda Bhumi* (1993) (153-169). She was compelled to the simple way of living of the tribe and thoroughly recorded her observations in *Bonda Land* and used those facts to draft this novel which is the fictional representation of Bondas living in harmony with nature.

Modernisation and the Crisis of Tribal Existence

The novel is not limited to that it has much more segments to it. It also records their connection with nature and their close affinity with the land they inhabit. It is in fact, their primal land or the original land on which their ancestors were first to dwell. The connection is so intense that the land itself imparts them their identity. The novel is not just an account of endangered Bonda tribe but also highlights their existential struggle for survival amidst internal and external conflicts. Ray, set down their reaction against modernisation and rapid urbanisation, the destruction of tribal values and loss of identity. “The stimulation to move on and progress was provided by the development project, and the uprooting and destruction it involved were sanitized under the neo-Cartesian category of ‘displacement’” (Shiva103). It is an excruciating tale based on existentialism and the gradual decline of tribal culture and taboo, which forms an inseparable part of tribal life which ends on a dejected note providing no perkiness for the future of Bondas.

Bonda Culture, Nature and Ecological Dependence

The urge of Ray to write an ethnographic narrative probing the culture and customs of Bonda tribe was the prominence of rapid downturn of Bonda population. According to the recent census, the number of Bonda tribes was lessening day by day and the only way of safeguarding them was conducting research, surveys and writing books on them as pointed out by Bonda Development Agency (BDA) that “their population growth rate is exceptionally sluggish compared to mainstream populations” (3). So, Ray took the project solemnly despite of all hardships and troubles she faced on Bonda land and the end product is a full-fledged novel of hundred chapters

which is mingled with folklore, myth, superstitions and mythology. The narrative style is such that someone is telling a story or narrating the antiquated history of the tribe.

As one moves from one chapter to other, many facts are unraveled, and information is flourished about the savage Bonda tribe and their eccentric way of life. Chitra and Tenzin observe that “the Bonda oral tradition contains a variety of myths on the creation that varies considerably from one another” (36). These gripping facts keep the reader’s attention grabbed and induce curiosity to explore more. Tribes are fully reliant on nature and natural resources. For instance, people of Bonda tribe have an indissoluble bond with salap tree from which they extract liquor and indulge especially, men of the tribe. Similarly, in the Bonda custom men quaff liquor, play, sing and relish while Bondunis (females) trawling the field and perform domestic work. Huge responsibilities are levied on the shoulder of Bonduni by the patriarchal society. As we witness in the narrative of the text:

If the Bondunis had followed the Dom Women and worn their garments long and wide, could they have toiled in the fields, and if they had worn their hair long they would have needed oil to tie it up and time as well (Ray 25).

Women of Bonda tribe were interdicted from wearing long wide clothes and keeping long hair rather they were expected to be half naked which deems really injustice. According to the researcher Lakshminath Rabha, “tribal women has always been represented as a figure of sensuality and social transgression” in the society (58). The men of the tribe were muscular and sturdy and often considered as criminal since they engaged themselves in deadly battles and believe killing is not an offence. The emerging problems dealt by Pratibha Ray in this piece of work are sexual exploitation, gotis (bonded labour system), displacement, industrialisation, natural disasters, modernisation, politics, socio-cultural crisis, etc. According to the researchers Dilshad Ali and Dr Kavita, the narrative moot over “interconnected themes of land rights, cultural identity, and resistance against modernity and external exploitation” which acts as an addition to the tribal woes.

Gender Roles and Female Oppression in the Bonda Tribe

Gender issues have been taken up gravely by the writer as it specifies their role in the society. Ray unfolds the duties of a woman in the tribal community and also moots over the division of work between man and woman. “Bonda woman is ascribed to peasantry and household work while the man’s work is generally associated with hunting” (Rabha 63). Women were enslaved not only physically but also emotionally. In tribal community girls and boys are demarcated on the basis of their sex right from their birth. In *The Primal Land* (originally *Adibhumi*), Pratibha Ray offers an anthropological exploration of Bonda tribal society, challenging the romanticized view of indigenous cultures as bastions of complete gender equality. Through a humanist and ecofeminist framework, Ray reveals profound gender imbalances rooted in unyielding traditions, disproportionate physical workloads, and systemic marginalisation.

While Bonda men bear minimal day-to-day burdens—primarily restricted to hunting or felling timber—they spend much of their time socializing on community stone benches and consuming sapung (liquor). Conversely, Bonda women (Bondunis) carry the entire weight of domestic and economic survival; they are solely responsible for child-rearing, domestic management, foraging, fetching water, and enduring the intense physical rigour of Podu (slash-and-burn farming). As the writer outlines:

In their custom a sickle is used to sever the umbilicus of a girl infant while arrow for the male infant. While the Bonda uses his arrow to kill, the Bonduni uses her da (sickle) to sustain (17).

Nature, Ownership, and Spiritual Ecofeminism

From the very beginning, there is pulchritudinous description of hills and mountains where Bonduni’s reside totally incurious from the outside world. They regard nature as the author narrates “the Bonda’s own everything here—the clouds, the sky, mountains, forests, waterfalls, the terraced fields, trees, animals...Even the mountains bear his name” (2).

These tribals deem what nature offers them, solely belongs to them, it is their property and they are the proprietor of it. They slash dense forest for cultivation, extract juice from salap tree for brewing liquor and even don’t pause to kill animals and rodents for lavish feasts. The sahumars or landlords make a business of land. In the words of the researchers Kumkum Sharma and Dr Shivangi Bhatt, Bondas are nourished in the lap of nature, they

“led a self-sufficient life by doing everything by themselves such as growing their own crops for self-consumption”

(69). Bondas use up all the natural resources and consider themselves as their possessor paving way for spiritual eco-feminism which affirms that God after forging earth, gave humans the dominion to rule over it.

The history of the Bonda tribe is narrated through venerated Bonda named Soma Muduli. Apart from Soma, there are other characters like Adibari Toki and Lachhama Toki. But the writer riveted on the plight of Budei, who serves as an epitome of female subjugation. Drinking extracts of salap tree makes Bonda men more spirited and zestful, often provoking them to indulge in fiercest fights which end up in long jail sentences. During these sentences, women were prophesied to remain loyal, taking up all the responsibilities of the house. Bonda tribe has an uncanny system of marriage. As the writer puts forth, “when the boy is ten years old, he is married to a bride of twenty” (The Primal Land 11). There is a peculiar tradition in which wives should be ten years elder than husbands during nuptial. For instance, Soma Muduli was tied in wedlock to Sombari at the age of eight only. The narration of Bonda tradition and custom through Soma Muduli sketch a vivid representation of the tribe.

Budei Toki and the Suffering of Tribal Women

Though the novel doesn't have a central plot, much of the Ray's sympathy goes with the central character Budei Toki, whose forbearance is tested for fourteen years while holding on for her husband Bagha Bindhu's return from prison. As evident in the lines of the scholar, “Budei Toki ultimately stands as a heartbreaking archetype for the universal exploitation and internal subjugation of the Bonduni within a heavily romanticized culture” (Chitra and Tenzin13). Bonda men drain most of their life in prison due to their intimidating nature. Among all other tribes, Bondas are known to be savage and fierce. They are easily instigated to fight which usually ends in murder. This is a customary thing for all the Bondas. Women in the tribe as well as in the modern society today live in an illusion that someone will take care of them in old age. But what happens in reality is ironic. Modern women have understood this that we sustain only for ourselves. And it is our sole responsibility to take care of ourselves as we spent most of our time with ourselves only. The only fault of Budei lies in being a woman in the tribal community and that she was getting old with age. All her efforts went into vain; the way she toiled in the field, maintained her chastity, the house she built and everything she did for the sake of her husband. Here, “Ray depicts the ugly face of the heartless patriarchal world where once a woman is withered and loses her youth and charm is accepted nowhere” (Sharma and Bhatt 72). What makes this patriarchal system strong is that in tribal communities there is no right for women. When Budei's husband returns from exile, he is so filled with pride and happiness that he crosses all the limits; ogles his daughter-in-law and brings home a second wife. Further disheartening Budei, he gives her longsi (divorce) and marries another young girl from his community. It was often believed that if a Bonduni loses her youth, she loses her everything.

All the above instances from the text throw light on the predicament of women in Bonda tribe which is being referred to as “a twin kind of oppression as neither they are given any rights in the community nor could they claim” from “outside world” (Sharma and Bhatt 72). They don't have any right even on the house which they built with much care and concern. There is no one for them. They are born to toil and serve men without expecting anything in return.

Displacement, Development, and Cultural Erosion

Ray in her masterpiece paints a clear picture of exploitation and disintegration of the Bondas which is brought to them not only by government officials but also through Sahukars and Landlords. Here the damage is done both internally and externally. “Tribal people have suffered layers of marginality and exploitation” (Rabha 58). The dictatorship of Bondas over the hills and mountains doesn't last long. They love and care for nature as their mother but the government intruders in the name of Bonda Development Agency (BDA) in an attempt to bring them to the mainstream take away their land, freedom and identity. “In 1977, the outside influences have given the Bondas new gods, new languages, and the new knowledge” thus resulting in the evaporation of tribal customs and values, which is evident in the lines of translator, who predicts a clear extinction of the tribe and refers this work as an obituary of the Bonda tribe (Chitra and Tenzin35).

Conclusion

Nature is the quiet stage on which human life unfolds, giving us air to breathe, food to eat, and countless small comforts that often go unnoticed. It also provides us with shelter, water, food, wood, air and all the things that are

indispensable for survival. Human beings cannot envision their life without it, yet they do impair and do injustice to nature in several ways like indiscriminate felling of trees, using air conditioners and motor vehicles that emit harmful gases, clearing forest cover to build public roads and houses, commercialisation of land, etc. It is high time we should get wary of the consequences of it otherwise it will be too late to take any action. Val Plumwood highlights the need for a more inclusive and integrated worldview in her 1993 book "Feminism and the Mastery of Nature," where she examines the links between the dominance of women and the dominance of nature and condemns dualistic thinking.

In the present time a balance is requisite and it's the call of the moment, if we don't stop exploiting nature the way global temperature is going upward and glaciers are melting, thriving on earth would extremely challenging. Similarly, for formulating a good balance in the society, one should learn the significance of equality of gender. Men and women are the two sides of a same coin, together they are able to create a sound atmosphere in the society. The regretful part is no one is concerned about women and their choices in this patriarchal society. Same thing is noticeable among the tribes also. If educated mass living in the city treat women as secondary then what will be the condition of women in tribal communities one can better envisage. They are treated as objects of mere entertainment by men. They don't have any rights of their own. Men have always owned them and exploited them as they do with nature. Society will thrive only when there will be gender equality. Women should be dealt equally as men then only a good society can be fabricated. Eco-feminism aims to restore balance in the society which is sick with gender inequality and probes harm to nature. Many contemporary texts are based on it as they want to convey their message globally creating awareness among the masses. These two texts are no exceptional; they highlight the problems faced by women in the tribal society which firmly believes in gender roles and bring out the destruction of nature through manmade activities. Both the texts aim at conveying message to the mankind that it is high time we should focus on creating a sustainable society based on equality and eco-ethics.

Both the texts are considered as masterpieces in Odia literature and fall under the genre of tribal literature as they are based on tribal life. Both the texts wonderfully paint true picture of two distinct tribal communities being ethnographic narratives. As per the findings, it is clear that in tribal society particularly in Paraja and Bonda tribe, women are viewed as inferior to men. They are looked down upon by the patriarchal society as mere objects, having no right and choice of their own like Budei and Jili who become the victims of the patriarchal rule and thus get manipulated by men.

Exploitation of nature and natural resources like forests and animals is also evident in the text. Indiscriminate felling of trees in Malli Damaka Hills and Bonda Hills in order to make land suitable for commercialization and agriculture is common amongst tribes as seen in Sukru Jani. These tribes fell trees not only for agriculture but also for constructing houses for their subsistence. The sahuks or landowners putting up a business of land hints at internal erosion while the government officials like forest guard and gulangbabus, who are appointed to protect nature and natural habitat act as saboteurs for their own profit and other selfish motives. Therefore, in the chosen text, the abuse of women and the relentless harm done to the earth together, slowly ripping apart both tribal ways of life and the land they depend on.

The plight of women and nature remains equivalent as both are unable to raise their voice against victimisation. There are no rules and rights for women in tribal culture similarly the rules and regulations enforced by the government to protect nature and natural habitat are unreachable to the tribes as the very representative of government turns out to be corrupt and exploitative. It is the persevering power of women and nature that makes them pronounced and impregnable.

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