

Mapping the Odia Milieu: A Socio-Cultural Analysis of the Selected Short Stories of Gopinath Mohanty

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Shradhanjali Mahapatra

MA Student, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad

Abstract

In the realm of Odia literature, invincible is the name of the Jnanpith awardee Gopinath Mohanty. The way he vibrantly captures the raw realities of Odia rural life with an acute depiction of the underprivileged and their unabashed hunger amidst a world that is indifferent to their existence speaks a lot of his craftsmanship. In the struggle for survival, man is very similar to the other creatures of this universe and there is hardly any differentiation when one seeks shelter in the lap of nature. This struggle is where all the communities bereft of their distinct tribal identities appear as an undivided mass and are presented in sheer contrast to the subtleties that prevail in the higher echelons of society. However, in such fleeting instances of spine-chilling hunger, humanity lingers around. This paper aims to analyse Mohanty's portrayal of the quest for survival in his manoeuvre of short stories and throw light on what essentially could be learned from these predicaments of the marginalized of which most of the population is unaware.

Keywords: Odia literature, Survival, Tribal Identity, Hunger, Humanity.

Odisha as considered is indeed India's best-kept secret. Many facets of its culture are still to be explored which remain hidden from the outer world. Only a handful of people who have studied Odisha's history or have lived in the land are aware of the rich cultural diversity that it is endowed with. Odia literature is a testament to this multifaceted cultural amalgamation that is characteristic of the Odia way of life. Amidst this, also exist different sections of society who feel the pangs of exclusion and are subject to several atrocities that put their identity and agency under threat. This theme has been analysed by the major writers of the language ranging over different genres. However, Gopinath Mohanty, the first Odia to win the Jnanpith award, stands class apart in depicting the raw realities of Odisha. Mohanty's oeuvre extends across several dynamic subjects. It is a rightful reflection of the sentiments of the Odia people and the way they lead their lives.

Gopinath Mohanty, being one of the best novelists of the Odia language, has also written extensively in the field of short stories. Each of his short stories tries to bring out life in its sheer veracity through his excellent characterization and subtle handling of the theme which mostly has a rural setting. This paper shall look at three

of his short stories namely “Ants”, “Tadpa” and “Dā”; and try to trace the intricacies of human existence where new challenges sprout up each day. “Ants” is a heart-wrenching narration of the plight of the people of the Kondh tribe who are subject to enormous struggle for survival and find it very difficult to lead a life of any joy amidst the hand-to-mouth existence. Their state is reduced to merely that of ants and the animal imagery as reflected from the title of the short story is indicative of the same. The short story “Tadpa” throws light on the culturally enriched Dongria Kondh tribe. Mohanty through the character of Tadpa presents before us the sense of integrity that these innocent tribal people carry in themselves and how they do not hesitate to help others navigate through the extremely dangerous routes of the dense forests. The story also gives us an account of the manifold tribal rituals and the vivid descriptions of their day-to-day life. “Dā” is a very differently crafted story in comparison to the previous two in the sense that the protagonist here is a female. However, it is the same with the other two in terms of the atrocities that it addresses which the poor tribals are made to encounter. Domi or Dā is the central character who is a poili i.e. concubine of Sadei Mohanty, a so-called wealthy man of respect. She never gets her fair share of dignity and recognition. She is always made to live on the whims of her master and is reduced to a mere object meant only to satisfy the man’s needs. After the death of Sadei, even though she continues to stay in the same household, she is neglected and is constantly looked down upon by the other members of the family. The three stories taken into consideration offer a nuanced commentary on how deeply entrenched caste, class and power dynamics dehumanize individuals, while simultaneously highlighting the moral ambiguity faced by those navigating these oppressive systems. However, the comparative analysis of the three stories highlights how the natural environment is both a source of sustenance and a force of oppression for the characters. The immediate environment can be a metaphor for both hope and despair that constantly provides them with the morale to retain their strength in this never-ending fight for sustenance.

In the stories, we get exposed to the nitty-gritty of tribal life. The tribal people aloof from the mechanizations of the urbanized world lead a simple life that revolves primarily around survival. This survival however is not devoid of struggles. The imposing of several laws from the administration poses severe threats to their independence and the relationship they share with nature. The lifestyle of the tribal people is explored with an emphasis on rituals and attire. The tribal people worship nature, and consider it to be their mother and protector. Most of their beliefs, traditions and rituals are centred on the concept of nature being the universal mother. Even in death, they talk of receding to the lap of the mother who gave them life. Their community, unknown to the sophistication of the higher echelons of society, carries in itself a sense of independence and emancipation that is absent even in the learned communities. Many of the tribal communities are matrilineal and the importance given to women is way above the usually accepted norms of a patriarchal construct. The young boys and girls are given the freedom to choose their partners in dhangda/dhangdi bents. This is a gathering that encompasses music and dance, where youngsters are made to spend time away from their parents and decide for themselves who their partners would be. The marriage is also solemnized in the same place. This act when viewed from the lens of the present-day world, can be considered to be very progressive which existed from centuries in the tribal lands of Odisha. Mohanty also very vividly mentions this tradition in his much-celebrated work *Paraja* (1945) which is a novel dealing with the life of the tribal Paraja community. In the story “Tadpa”, we see the titular character is very hopeful of going to the dhangdi bent at Penubali village to find a mate for himself. On his way, he comes across a group of forest officials and helps them find the route. He also talks highly of Dhartani or Basumati i.e. the earth being the eternal mother on whose lap he would rest after his death. From this, we get a clear picturization of the devotion of the tribal people to nature which is backed by courage of heart. This can easily remind

one of the heart-wrenching bhumipraves scene from the Ramayana where Mata Sita asks Bhudevi (Mother Earth) to break open and take her (Sita) in her embrace, instead of returning to Lord Ram's palace. The essence of the beliefs and traditions prevalent in tribal lifestyle is at par with what the most learned and privileged follow.

Another noteworthy aspect of the stories is the presence of songs in tribal life. Whether it is a matter of celebration or bereavement, tribal life is always accompanied by melody. These songs are a reflection of the emotional landscape of the characters and the cultural essence of Odisha's indigenous communities. They aptly justify the deep-rooted connection between the land, people and their traditional customs, showcasing how oral traditions and music are an integral part of the socio-cultural fabric of Odia tribes. In "Ants" for instance, the laborious work is accompanied by tribal songs, serving as a way to sustain both morale and cultural continuity amidst intense struggle. These songs can be seen as a form of resistance, subtly pushing back the dehumanizing forces of labor exploitation. James C. Scott in *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (1985) brings about the difficulties that are innate to the lives of rural people in a Malaysian context where subtle resistance is essential in everyday life to subvert the oppressing nature of this existing hierarchy. He mentions,

The poor, when they may do so with relative safety, display an impressive capacity to penetrate behind the pieties and rationales of the rich farmers and to understand the larger realities of capital accumulation, proletarianization, and marginalization. They emphasize and manipulate those values that will serve their material and symbolic interests as a class. They reject the denigrating characterizations the rich deploy against them. And within the narrow limits created by the fear of repression and the "dull compulsion of economic relations," they act to defend their interests by boycotts, quiet strikes, theft, and malicious gossip. (Mohanty 304)

In Odisha's tribal culture, songs are also linked to rituals and festivals that celebrate the cycles of nature, harvest, and the gods of the earth. The dhangda/dhangdi bents are also filled with music and dance which are an integral part of the tribal communities. Ultimately, the songs are more than mere background; they are symbols of survival, endurance, and the unbreakable link between the people and their land, heritage, and values. These songs are also the exhibition of the rhythm of life that the tribal people are intent on maintaining irrespective of the intense labor that they are forced to carry out for survival.

In "Tadpa", we are exposed to yet again another fascinating ritual of tribal life- the ritual of naming the newborns. The children were not named as per the wish of parents. Rather there would be a gathering where all the villagers would come followed by a priest reciting an endless list of names. Offerings would be made to the deity of fowl, unbroken rice, powders and raisins. A possessed woman known as the 'kalisi' would be reciting mantras throughout and throwing grains of rice into the water pot. She is entitled to pick up the name for the child on the recital of which a grain would stand erect (Mohanty 57). Such fascinating practices are very indigenous to the tribal consciousness. Their beliefs and rituals form the central part of their being. Thus, it can be inferred that through the lens of Odisha's rich tribal traditions, Mohanty's stories not only offer a critique of the socio-economic marginalization of these communities but also celebrate their cultural strength and resilience. As mentioned, the tribal songs, which flow through Mohanty's narratives, act as subtle yet powerful expressions of identity, resistance, and connection to the natural and spiritual world. By giving voice to these traditions, Mohanty acknowledges the central role that tribal culture plays in shaping the lives of his characters and the broader socio-cultural landscape of Odisha.

All the three stories give us acute presentations of the tribal life of Odisha. The forests are described with impeccable detailing. There are vivid explanations of the topography of the lands and

how the cultivation of maize, bajra, mandia and other millets form the major source of sustenance for the tribal community. In the stories we get lucid descriptions of the forests, its greenery and the presence of wildlife who, in spite of posing a threat to the safety of tribal men; are an inseparable aspect of their everyday life.

Hari Pani asked, 'Are there tigers in this forest?' Tadpa laughed and said, 'You could as well ask if there was fish in the water or stars in the sky. Of course, tigers are there. Where else could they go?

'Has a tiger eaten up someone?'

'Eaten?' Tadpa asked. 'Don't you eat when hungry? It has eaten many and it lives near that waterfall.'

'But you were alone; were you not afraid?'

Tadpa said, 'Are you afraid when you go on the road? Don't people die, run over by car? That is your road, this ours. I am not afraid.' (Mohanty 64-65)

This depicts how the tribal people have internalised the entire flora and fauna to be nothing less than their own extended family. Tadpa even says that he is not afraid of tigers as it is as usual for them as walking on the road for the others. So, the presence of animals forms a significant feature of these tribal communities. In "Ants" as mentioned earlier, the animal imagery brings about a parallelism between humans and the animals showcasing their similar stature against the might of nature. Just the way ants move forth in lines to gather their food, these tribal men toil hard daily to feed their families. This nevertheless creates a sense of pathos when posed in sharp contrast to the rich history of the land of which the tribal people are a part of.

Ramesh kept standing. For him there was no more history. There was no Kapilendradev, no Purushottam, no Konarak. There was no special distinctive image of the men who form the backbone of a country or a nation. History was devoid of meaning. There was nothing but ants, ants; everywhere, hungry ants carrying mouthfuls of food in their struggle for survival and the stream of ants converging on ant-heaps for yet another expedition. It must live. (Mohanty 27)

The presence of animals is also substantially felt in "Dā" where there occur numerous appearances of the dogs that are shooed away time and again by different characters. The plight of Dā is also similar to that of these dogs as she becomes an unwanted object in the house of Sadei Mohanty after his death. Her raising voice against the liaison of Mali and Sautia is ignored quite in a very similar way as to how a powerful human pays no heed to a barking dog. Ultimately what remains at the end of the story when Domi decides to take her own life by jumping into the river is nothing but the sound of the howling dog.

The water of the river surges over the embankment and eats into the soil. It has done so in many places along its path.

Silence all around.

Only the scrawny dog sits on its haunches and beats its tail five times on the ground before emitting a heartrending howl.

'Woa...oa...oa...oa...!'

(Mohanty 23)

Keeping aside the diversified cultural milieu that the stories harbour, when we reflect on all other aspects of tribal life from the lens of the subaltern theorists, a few observations are worth noting. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" highlights the idea that the subaltern's voice is often not heard in dominant discourse because it is either misinterpreted or erased by those in power. This concept is vividly reflected in "Dā". The protagonist Domi's limited agency is a reflection of the broader condition of the subaltern, who, as Spivak argues, cannot assert their own narrative in a system designed to suppress their voice. Being subject to intense humiliation and despair, she decides to end her life which throws light on the fact of the

subaltern being silenced and not given a voice amidst this hegemonic power structure. In this context women become doubly marginalized as they have to survive not only against the pangs of social marginalization but also the brutalities of patriarchy.

Further, Ranajit Guha's concept of dominance without hegemony is vibrantly visible in the story "Ants". The oppression of the tribal men by the forest officials can be studied as a consequence of the colonial setup, where men of power deem it their right to subjugate the weak and the marginalized. This oppression is internalised even without the presence of any conspicuous hierarchy. The class difference between the forest officials and the tribal people is not something derived from the scriptures as the *varna vyavastha*; rather it is a form of distinction that comes to practice despite its primary goal being democratic administration. The tribal people are always in fear of forest officials even though the major duty of the officials is to safeguard the forest and its people. This fear arises from the power relations that come into being as a result of colonialism. The forest officials foreign to the tribal way of life impose rules and regulations with utmost severity that hinder the human-nature relationship along with making their survival more difficult. Thus, being constantly caught in the cobweb of hand-to-mouth existence, they resort to illegal ways of earning, an instance of which forms the central theme of "Ants".

These three stories undoubtedly present before us the raw realities of tribal existence. However, a greater essence that can be drawn from these stories lies in the aspect of humanity which is central to the major characters' psyche. In "Ants" this is reflected in the character of Ramesh. Being an eyewitness to the destitute state of the rice smugglers, leads to the awakening of his conscience which then motivates him to let go of them. His journey is a powerful narrative that captures his inner struggle between duty and humanity. Earlier he was very hopeful of securing a promotion by checking this rice smuggling to the south as the sense of his identity troubled him incessantly and asked him to maintain the pride of his soil. However, his raw encounters with the tribal folk disturb his preconceived thoughts and he is haunted by the visions of his own mortality. This vision intensifies his inner conflict and the contemplation of mortality pushes him further toward the path of empathy. He ultimately takes the decision to let go of the smugglers and not debar them from whatever benefit they could grapple from that amount of rice in their hands. His actions underscore the belief that laws are ultimately meant to serve humanity, not to stand in its way. His choice to prioritize the life of those men over his official responsibilities, speaks to the enduring value of empathy and the power of transformation. In this way, Ramesh's story resonates as a timeless parable of the triumph of humanity over the often-rigid constructs of duty and law. Likewise, in "Tadpa", despite him being in delay for meeting his *dhangdi*, Tadpa does not at all hesitate to lend a helping hand to the men traversing their way through the dense forest. His personal interest is kept aside as in the moment it becomes more crucial for him to serve the needs of others. The hospitality extended by the Dongria Kondh houses is indeed commendable as it becomes a major aid for the administrative officials during their inspection work. The multifaceted conversations between the Development Officer, Parashuram and the anthropologist Professor Bharata reveal the power dynamics of the social system that runs among the tribes. However, there underlies an untold innocence in the majority of these tribal people that keeps them aloof from the outer world and this unawareness preserves the proximity that they share with Nature. Yet again, in the story "Dā" the protagonist proves herself to be the torch-bearer of humanity when despite the intense humiliation that she is subject to, she keeps her integrity and devotion to Sadei Mohanty intact. However, she ultimately succumbs to the gradual increase in the denunciation of her individuality. But for long, she maintains her humility, aspiring to secure a rightful living, despite being put to embarrassment in the world of feudal lords where she is neither entitled to an identity nor a place of her own. Her pitiful existence has been described as such by Saroj Kumar Mahananda: 'A woman who

became a concubine to any man was like a piece of personal property, a sex slave, of the man and enjoyed no right due to a lawfully wedded wife. She would just get a place to stay and, in some instances, a secondary position in the man's family" (69).

Gopinath Mohanty's short stories intricately weave the socio-cultural milieu of Odisha, offering profound insights into the lives of its marginalized tribal communities. Through narratives such as "Tadpa", "Ants" and "Dā", Mohanty portrays the struggle, resilience, and rich cultural heritage of the subaltern, shedding light on the complexities of their existence. His exploration of the socio-cultural landscape of Odisha serves to illuminate the intricate dynamics of power and marginalization. By centering on the subaltern experience, he challenges readers to acknowledge and engage with the voices that have been historically silenced. Through the lens of subaltern theory, Mohanty not only highlights the struggles of Odisha's tribal communities but also celebrates their enduring spirit and cultural richness, reaffirming their place within the broader narrative of Indian society. In doing so, he compels us to reconsider our understanding of agency, identity, and the power of storytelling in the face of oppression.

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