

Tribal Identity Concerns in Literature: A Critical Study of Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor*

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Abstract: *'Tribe' means a group of people living at a particular place from times immemorial. Tribe's identities are differently by named at different places according to their geographical positioning, their social stratification in the society and so on which makes them distinctive from others. Tribes are rich in their culture, customs and folk tradition etc. There are few authors all over the world who writing tribal identities in literature and their social life is rich in their creative works. The foremost objective of this research paper is to analyse the tribes issue in literature as a discourse in societal, customs, traditional, rituals within the reference of the writings of Gopinath Mohanty's The Ancestor (1944). Gopinath Mohanty (Indian novelist) is significant novelist who has made a bold attempt in raising of Canon in tribal literature. This research paper is based on tribal traditional identities and historically transformed images, rituals, customs, and social structures of their own common, but diversified culture. A thematic approach from tribal identity concerns perspective has been adopted for this research paper.*

Key Words: Identities; The Ancestor; Gopinath Mohanty; traditional; rituals; culture and hegemony

I came a thousand miles to see your face,
O mountain, A thousand
Miles did I come to see your face. (Arun Joshi)

The word 'tribes' refers to a culture heritage and historical identity concept. It is used for the tribe as a separate group of persons having their own identity, and cultural traits. This society lives in isolated areas and their social life style is different from the main stream society. Its culture, customs, rituals and traditions are in heritage from the earlier generations and moves to the next generation. Tribes are named differently at different traditional identity places according to their customary, geographical positioning, their social stratification in the society and so on which makes them distinctive from others. The foremost objective of this research is to analyse the tribe's identity issue in literature as a discourse in societal, customs, traditional,

rituals within the reference of the writing of Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor*. A thematic approach from tribal identity concerns perspective has been adopted for this research paper.

Gopinath Mohanty is first Indian Oriyan language tribal writer, he has composed 24 novels, short stories, plays, and autobiographies. His mostly literary works have translated into colonial language, who has made a bold attempt in raising of Canon in tribal literature. Mohanty represent to their identity, traditional or historically transformed images, rituals and social structures of their own common, but diversified culture. *The Ancestor* represents a fantastic tribal world as a tiger wilderness society. The "ancestor" is an ancient date-palm tree representing the eternal ancestor; it stands for cultural heritage of the tribal identity manifest in their rituals and customs. Mohanty, in the novel visualises life



in a tribal community against a cosmic background.

Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor* is a soul. Soul is an eternal and the body is subject to death, the soul express itself in a different body after the end of one body; thus rebirth is the inevitable reality in the world: "...I am Dadi Budha, the greatest of all gods. I am the creator and the destroyer" (62-62).

On the other side tribal folk tradition and literature are gradually falling into nothingness as the tribal villages are being uprooted and tribes are displaced from their environment. Their oral traditions have been recorded and documented by those who first came in contact with the tribals. *The Ancestor* is based on Paraja tribal community and this text is set in Lulla Village in Oddisa state in India. Paraja tribes' culture, customs, rituals, tradition and taboos etc. identities are different from main stream society and other tribal societies. The socio-religious structure is differ from tribe to tribe but most often, they run along the same line and categories. The religious practices, customs, and political system changed significantly under British colonialism in the 19th century. The Paraja tribal community became overwhelmingly Christian under colonisation. "An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognized. These differences are essential to its being; if they did not exist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity." (William E.)

An important event in the Mohanty novel *The Ancestor* is the hunt during the spring festival of Paraja tribes. This tribal society is fellow to western culture, unmarried Paraja tribal boys and girls spend the night in their respective dormitories and enjoy with wine party and romantic songs to liberty of knowing one another more intimately.

Paraja boys and girls danced....

During the dance at night the seven Domb girls, their hands around each-others' waist waving a piece of cloth, jumping and shouting, would pass through the line of Paraja girls and surround Paraja boys and dance. The night grew darker as they drank and danced.... And of course varieties of sarees, coloured blouses-parrot prints, star prints, tiger prints. The air over there would be heavy with the smell of scented oil in the hair. And barrel after barrel wine. (19)

According to social activist Ramanika Gupta tribes have already started the struggle for identity and rights in different parts of the country. The tribes in world have their habitat usually in remote and isolated areas of the forests and the hilly areas away from the sophisticated and dominant society. Mohanty uses the story of the novel's hero," Thenga Jani, the son of Ram Chandra Muduli, the headman of Lulla village, is betrothed to a beautiful girl Saria Daan, the only daughter of Hari Jani of the same village. They come under the spell of Santosh Kumari, a Christian Domb girl" (Narayan 2). Santosh Kumari marries Thenga Jani out of love, but Paraja tribes don't allow this custom. They fall deeply in love and reject the discipline of the tribal society and leave it. After marriage both reached Assam tea garden across the mountain from Lulla village. Both are unable to decide what to do, how to get out of this. This novel was originally written in Oriya language, the language of urban Oriya set in a rural as well as natural beauty (hills, mountain, rivers, and cave) in tribal areas. Mohanty has written enormous novels, and with even less concern for their popularity, he has taken as his subjects, not the popular romantic or less socio-political topics in his tribal literary works. This novel deals with the issues of identity in Paraja tribal customs, and rituals, including family life in



marital frustration, sexual abuse, and domestic violence in marital lives which are regarded by the victims as degrading, humiliating, painful and unwanted throughout life:

“They were all human beings and they had to toil in the hope of a better tomorrow, although their tomorrow might turn out to be no better than their yesterday” (43).

Mohanty has written enormous novels, and with even less concern for their popularity, he has taken as his subjects, not the popular romantic or less socio-political topics in his tribal literary works. *The Ancestor* creates a crystalline view of Paraja customs, rituals and romance including family life in the polygamous household, the patterns of falling in love and marriage, work and play in the public communal setting and the placement of women in this patriarchal society. The Paraja tribal community understanding of man maintains a balance between man's personal identity as a unique individual and his collective identity as a member of his society. In this text Thenga Jani represents the social political and economic life style, of Paraja tribal society. The time of imperial before 1947, That time tribes' were double margin form Western modernity and Indian Upper economic class, they did not identified self-identity, Mohanty has gone back in history, to the oral tradition of the Paraja tribes and has created a novel which sheds light on their way of life and their thinking which is being corrupted by forces of a materialistic society:

The hamlet consists of two clusters of thatched huts huddled together under the shade of some trees. These are its two separate 'streets', in one of which live people of the Paraja tribe, while the Dombs live in other. (Paraja 1)

The early tribal fiction of Gopinath's *Mana Gahirara Chasa* (study of mental ability) and *Paraja* which were followed by *Dadi Budha* (The Ancestor, 1944). Mohanty's literary and non-literary works are elaborate portrayals of the past history and pristine culture identities of the Paraja tribal society, before the point of contact with Western power. The Paraja tribal colony presented in novels is a self-sustained community which has still retained their myths, customs, belief, religion, proverbs, tradition, tales and taboos with maximum sense of duty. But all these undergo drastic changes with the intervention of the white man. Gopinath novels map the various contours of the tribal life in its struggle against the systematic encroachment of their cultural space.

Thenga Jani, the son of Ram Chandra Muduli, the headman of Lulla village, is betrothed to a beautiful girl, Saria Daan, the daughter of Hari Jani of the same Lulla village. But he comes under the spell of Santosh Kumari, a Christian Domb girl. They fall deeply in love and reject the discipline of the Paraja tribal society and leave it. Both decide to run away to Assam to work on the tea estates; they plan to build their dream home in a town where the rules of the tribal society do not prevail:

In that darkness four villagers from Lulla came down the hillside. Dense forest stood on both side. This was the kingdom of the tiger. Four of them- Ram Muduli, the village headman, Chancheri Domb, the barber, Hari Jain, an elderly man and Eleo Sunna, the old man from the Christian settlement- groped their way sticks and torches. (1)

Gopinath Mohanty writers chart the unacknowledged private world of tribes in their fictional works. The protagonists of the chosen



novels *The Ancestor* show how tribal society structure for an identity; they may be black or brown, may be located in forest and mountain areas. Mohanty's *The Ancestor*, recounts the tribal life of the Lulla village the hero Thenga Jani represents Paraja tribes, and communicates the agony of the tribals as well as of marginalised people all over the world. Many of Mohanty's characters represent Paraja tribe community's social life, and this text is set on Paraja Tribes society in Oddisa state in India. There are some differences of tribal identities such as geographical, historical, political, economic, multicultural and multiracial. (Geographical and climate conditions of the regions and their biodiversity). It has tried to forge a link between the literature and existing environmental issues. Gopinath has used beautifully documented the environmental elements to unfold the stories of the novels. Mohanty in the novel deals with the issues of marriage relationship, marital frustration, domestic violence and sexual abuse in marital lives which is regarded by the victims as degrading, humiliating, painful and unwanted throughout life. The study finds the inter connection link between the traditional rituals to modern custom identities throw all his literary works.

Mohanty's focus, in his fiction, is on the status of cultural hegemony in Paraja tribe's society. The character of Eleo represents Western culture. Paraja tribal community has changed religions, customs and festivals, by western education and western economic power:

Eleo was sitting on the verandah, preparing an account of the levy collected. He used to collect four annas per plough from every Christian farmed and give the amount to the pastor, who would send it to the missionary. It was the sahib who spent the money. The church had to

be white-washed Festivals were celebrated. And of course there were the schools. Would this meagre amount suffice? But then it would certainly be of some help. Devout Christians ought to pay at least this much. (23)

According to S C Mohanty, The Paraja tribe community worship a number of gods and deities for their well-being. Dead ancestors receive routine worship and sacrifices at festive occasions. The Paraja tribe's identity observe many seasonal festivals with pomp and ceremony around the year in order to propitiate their deities and ancestors as well as for their own enjoyment. Their festival, rituals, customs etc... are represent tribal identities:

In December, tribes observe one of their major festivals, to mark the gathering of the harvest this is followed fifteen days later, by the ritual eating of the new grain. Tribal life is punctuated with many festivals, but chief among them is the festival of spring a fortnight of revelry, hunting and feasting. (87)

Mohanty's *The Ancestor* both race and community are the major elements of oppression of tribes while race does not appear as a matrix of oppression in Mohanty's fiction, because almost all his characters belong to the same race. Instead of race, the dominant patriarchal behaviour patterns and ideologies are inscribed more prominently in the interaction of tribes categories in his fiction located in beautiful forest, dark mountains and hilly areas in our country. This text represents hydride culture identities (Christian and Hindu), multicultural and multiracial in Paraja tribal society:

To the market walked both the Paraja girls and the Domb girls. The Christian girls in blouses and pieces of white or multi-coloured cloth with pattern of red, yellow and green went there. (Mohanty 7)



A number of common thematic concerns have been identified in the works of Mohanty's *The Ancestor*, on the basis of which the narratives as well as the characters may be grouped as evolving around the motifs of oppression, struggle and surfacing.

The conflict of *The Ancestor* shown in Thenga Jain, the traditional society fall from the traditional and rituals identities. There are many identities ways to divide the terrain of literature written by Indian and Indian subcontinent countries. These approaches reflect the fact that the continent is home to many difference people and cultural practices, political and physical geographies, local-nonlocal languages. Indian tribal literature is also often categorised by a language and geographical location of expression or genre (narrative, proverb, poetry, drama, essay etc...). On the other side vernacular language writing style of Mohanty all character are represents to different type of identities by their respective custom and traditional. Every characters of Mohanty are connected to tribal ritual, custom, traditional, and belief etc... are represent to different discourse of tribals identities. Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor* highlights the incident of psychological and physical sufferings of Paraja tribal society. Moreover, their religion is based on nature-worship, animism, anthropomorphism, ancestor-worship etc.

Gopinath Mohanty is the authors of tribal narratives and their narratives represent the colonial identities power. It is appropriate to say that Gopinath Mohanty has successfully created a tribal identities to bring the disorderly to the tribal society. This text stand as a testimony to the powerful section of the tribal society and leave no scope of confusion due to the outermost clarity of language maintained all the way through the novel. According to Mahaswetha Devi, an eminent Bengali writer

and Marxist activist, rightly commented that "tribals are the most civilized people".

Mohanty has described the tribal world as more attractive and peaceful. On the basis of the analysis of these text, it is appropriate to say that the world in which tribal people live is self-sufficient in its own way because they have rich wealth of their own traditions, values, and beliefs.

Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor* highlights the incident of psychological and physical sufferings of Paraja tribal society. Their physical world is represents to their social and geographical location identities. Their psychological structure is based on spiritual, the title of the text "The Ancestor" is represent to ancient myths and gods. They are not free from myth, God and ancient rituals in age of globalization. Tribe's identities are connected to ancient time to present time by their customs and traditional.

They tried to offer him bribes so that their future would be safe. They were all human beings and they had to toil in the hope of a better tomorrow, although their tomorrows might turn out to be no better than their yesterdays. Dadi budha was a god; his demands for rites and offerings had to be met without delay. (44)

The Parajas tribes of Lulla Village believe in the union of the eternal soul after death. As the soul is eternal and the body is subject to death, the soul expresses itself in a different body after the end of one body; thus rebirth is the inevitable reality in the world. Such idea is the central concern of Hindu philosophy which finds echo in "The Eternal Reality of Soul's Immortality", Chapter-II of The Bhagvat Gita, where Lord Krishna has posited before Arjuna that the soul never takes birth, nor does it die, nor does it come in to being again at the time the creation of a body, no force can perish the soul; it is unchanging



and is not destroyed with the total destruction of the body” (qtd. in Chaturvedi 8-9). In Paraja tribe’s community belief the world is a place where every being gets purified through rigors and penance; complexities and sufferings are the preconditions: “...I am Dadi Budha, the greatest of all gods. I am the creator and the destroyer.” (Mohanty 62-62) These identities constituting beliefs and desires have brought about a complexity in the modern society on thought of earlier.

On the other hand The Ancestor, recounts the tribal life of the Lulla village the hero Thenga Jani represents Paraja tribes, and communicates the agony of the tribals as well as of marginalised people all over the world. Many of Mohanty’s characters represent Paraja tribe community’s social life.

Mohanty’s *The Ancestor* represents hydride culture (Christian and Hindu), multicultural and multiracial in Paraja tribal society:

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The social life comes alive in the novel *The Ancestor* in a very authentic manner. Through the character of Lulla Village, Mohanty exposes the hypocritical values of tribal society. Though there has been a progressive development in various fields over the years, the social system in the different countries of the world is yet to see any drastic changes with regard to the status of tribal. Mohanty’s *The Ancestor* explores many aspects of the tribals inhabiting the Jungles, hills regions of Orissa state (India) in Lulla village and he very particularly charts the various contours of the tribal life.

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represent the colonial power. It is appropriate to say that Gopinath Mohanty has successfully created a tribal discourse to bring the disorderly to the identity of tribal society. This text stand as a testimony to the powerful section of the tribal society and leave no scope of confusion due to the outermost clarity of language maintained all the way through the novel.

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