

Representation of Tribal Woman in *Paraja* and *The Primal Land*.

Lakshminath Rabha

Department of English, D.R. College, Golaghat, Assam
luku.rava@gmail.com

Abstract

The process of representation calls for close reading and re-examination of the discourse of representation in the postcolonial situation under the consideration that the discourse of representation involves certain political interests resulting in a fallacious construction of the original text. The represented body is refashioned and therefore may be seen as a product of subjective construction of the political agency that comes into play - a key role in the entire practice in which the dominant power dynamics decide what to present and what to erase. The discourse of tribal representation remains skewed with some gray areas of political debate in the recent times owing to its seemingly unresolved issues ranging from misrepresentation of socio-cultural aspects to construction of certain stereotypes that has led to further distortion of tribal identity. On the question of fallacious representation, tribal woman has always been at loss in the patriarchal setup where woman is commodified at the backdrop of colonial invasion in India that channelized external influences in the guise of modernity. Within the premise of the above proposition, this paper intends to discuss the politics involved in the process of representation and examine the status of tribal woman as represented in the select novels.

Keywords: Postcolonial situation, fallacious representation, modernity.

Representation may be loosely defined as a process of presenting a substitute of something or making a presentation on behalf of someone/something. This definition, however, fails to meet certain criteria of authentic representation when contested under the parameter of present development in postcolonial studies. This is mainly to do with the representation of the subaltern section of the society under the dominance of certain political agency. It further opens a ground for discussion on the potential political interest that determines what to represent and what to erase or who represents whom. It is argued under the postcolonial rubrics that the colonized body during colonial period was subjected to certain

misleading representation pertaining to the self/other dichotomy that largely guided the colonial narrative. Anthropological texts produced during the colonial period were instrumental in propagating and giving currency to Eurocentric view of the world which eventually situated the West at the centre of the order of all things with further confirmation of its peripheral colonies as Tilotoma Misra rightly argues, “colonialism, however, superimposed a Eurocentric concept of modernity derived from the enlightenment...” (Misra 2011, xiv). Representation of the colonized not only corroborates the colonial authority but also appropriates the position and power dynamics of the authority under the

premise of the apparent rationale of civilizing the savage. Pramod K. Nayar maintains, “Colonial discourse masks the power relations between races, cultures and nations. It makes the relations seem natural, scientific and objective. Colonial discourse therefore produces stereotypes from within European prejudices, beliefs and myths” (Nayar 2012, 3). Nayar's argument points at the politics involved in the process of 'othering' of the non-West or in the construction of what Edward Said defined as the 'Orient' in his book *Orientalism* (1995). Colonial takeover of a certain geographical area entails the power politics involved in the establishment of the administrative control that radiates from the dichotomous relation of the colonizer and the colonized. The construction of self/other binary on the basis of racial difference also demarcates the cultural and social disparity. In Nayar's words colonial discourse acts as a 'mask' that appropriates the power relation involved in the regimentation of the colonized body. Colonial texts further add to the entire design of reduction of the 'other' by the construction of certain stereotypes on the colonized society that inversely legitimizes colonial intervention for the correction of the heathen natives. Colonial representation of the natives in the colonial texts is thus guided by racial prejudice that further devalues and erases the entire socio-cultural ethos from the subconscious of the native as well as the entire human epistemology.

Colonial enterprise was not always dependent on the military power of the colonial authority but was simultaneously run with a purpose of winning the mind of the colonized which largely proved to be more effective in giving permanency to colonial takeover. Representation of the colonized body as the

'other' of the West served the purpose of emphasizing the racial, social and cultural differences with the 'self'. This further strengthened the ground for perpetuation of colonial engagement for the correction of the 'other' by way of taking it under the fold of the 'self' through the colonial design of civilizing mission of the 'other' such as English education, religious conversion etc. Colonial civilizing mission ostensibly had certain positive impacts on the natives with the introduction of modern education but it also caused an irreversible damage to the cultural identity of the natives by negation of its significance. The civilizing mission undertaken by the colonial power also contributed to the creation of certain elite class within the natives who eventually participated in the oppression of their own people. Frantz Fanon rightly argues,

“All colonized people- in other words, people in whom an inferiority complex has taken root, whose local cultural originality has been committed to the grave- position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture.” (Fanon 2008, 2)

Colonial narratives affirm the continuation of colonial rule and legitimize its position with the claim of employing scientific and objective methodology in the study of the native notwithstanding the fact that this process of distancing with much emphasis on the difference between the 'self' and the 'other' was primarily grounded on racial differences.

Tribal representation in colonial ethnographic texts were largely prejudiced and prescriptive in nature with little serious attempt at exploring and understanding the possibility of an existent ethnic civilization embedded in its own value system. Needless to mention that

pertaining to these two significant factors of incongruity. Tribal life world was represented as an entity that is fundamentally governed by primitiveness, savagery and obscurity lacking in scientific reason that further led to the construction of certain stereotypes around tribal identity. The study of tribal people was very often based on voyeuristic gaze without much empirical revision which resulted in a largely romanticized and biased representation of tribal identity in the colonial texts.

Extension of this discussion to the representation of tribal women further problematizes the entire discourse, for like the tribal men, the women were also subjected to many misrepresentations through the wrong interpretation of certain socio-cultural ethos of the tribal. Tribal women has always been represented as a figure of sensuality and social transgression in the colonial representation pertaining to the comparatively open and liberal nature of tribal society that allows much freedom to women in terms of social mobility and individual rights. It is important to note that social freedom enjoyed by the tribal women was alien and undesirable to the 19th century European patriarchal setup and therefore the fallacious representation of the tribal women may be understood as the backlash of the male ego of the colonizer. It is however pertinent to mention that the colonial design of representation of tribal life has not undergone any remarkable transformation even in the postcolonial situation in India with further perpetuation of the same dialectic in the dominant mainstream understanding of tribal condition. On the question of fallacious representation, tribal people have suffered different layers of marginality and exploitation. The continuation of such prejudiced

representation of the tribal has caused discontentment and strong resistance to marginalization in the present situation of identity consciousness among the tribal.

Representation cannot be simply understood as a process of someone/something making the presentation on behalf of someone/something. Rather, in the event of representation, the representing agency situates itself at the centre of the representational discourse. The agency eventually regulates the power dynamics in the discourse of the representation and the act of representation cease to remain objective making room for subjectivity and its lingering prejudices. Representation thus remain skewed in the problem of indeterminacy with regard to the authenticity of the represented body for the process of representation often suffers from the tendency of being guided by the subjective priorities of the representing agency.

Stuart Hall in his essay "The Work of Representation" (1997) comments that language plays the central role in the process of representation and appropriation of the represented text as he further argues, "Language is one of the 'media' through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture. Representation through language is therefore central to the process by which meaning is produced" (Hall 1997, 1). Here, Hall deliberately emphasizes the terms 'language' and 'culture' in relation to representation, for these are the two factors that always remain enmeshed in the power dynamics of the dominant that regulates the entire process of representation. Representation invariably is dependent on the function of language and it is through language that any represented object gets recognition and permanence in a culture.

Subject to phonocentric view of human world, language serves the purpose of 'media' through which message is transmitted in a meaningful manner and subsequently a meaningful identity is ascribed to the represented object. It is however pertinent to note that language is arbitrary in nature and owing to this arbitrariness of language, representation and the meaning it produces remains unstable with further confirmation of the temporality of the fixity with regard to meaning. The meaning of any representation is determined by the language and culture of the dominant and hence the meaning keeps on shifting with the shift in the power structure. In the premise of the slippery nature of meaning pertaining to the arbitrariness of sign system, every reading of the representational text "...opens representation to the constant 'play' or slippage of meaning, to the constant production of new meanings, new interpretations" (Hall 1997, *ibid.* 32). The relational thread of language and culture with representation further extends to the power dynamics that regulates in a particular society where the meaning or truth is constructed and established.

Michel Foucault in his deliberation on 'Truth and Power' in an interview published in the book *Power/Knowledge* (1980) argues, "Truth isn't outside power. Truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true, the mechanisms and instances which enables one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned, the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true" (Foucault

1980, 131). Foucault's argument focuses on the process of production of truth and perpetuation of this construct which is carried out with the exercise of certain power politics in a given society. He calls the entire exercise as the work of 'regime of truth' that controls the discourse of truth and sanctions the license of continuing it as truth.

Extending this argument to the representation of the tribal in India and elsewhere situates the tribal at the receiving end owing to the history of marginality meted out to them by the mainstream society. The marginalization of tribal community in India dates back to the colonial period when the colonial anthropologists classified the entire tribal population under a singular identity marker without much study on the potential socio-cultural differences among the tribes. The underlying colonial blunder in the classification of the tribal as primitive, savage and essentially lacking in progress and scientific knowledge was further continued in the post-independence era in India. Consequently the status of tribal remained almost the same in the post-independence India as far as representation of tribal reality in the mainstream is concerned. The study of tribal society has always been done placing it against the mainstream society by way of comparison in the colonial model. Progress in tribal society is measured in relation to the degree of assimilation of tribal society with the mainstream and absorption of certain markers of evolution such as literacy, social mobility and economy. A scientific and empirical study of the tribal with a view of understanding the inner dynamics of the tribal life-world is seldom done which may be understood as the fundamental cause of misrepresentation of certain aspects of tribal society.

The misrepresentation of the tribal has further given way to the fallacious representation of the tribal woman in all the available literature due to the lack of sincere and systematic study on the subject. The condition of tribal woman has been subjected to casual commentary lacking in insight and a definite methodology of study which resultantly contributed to the formation of certain stereotypes that has remained instrumental in furthering the sense of marginalization. Commenting on the status of woman in tribal society, Virginius Xaxa argues, "Except in some of the works of Elwin, Furer-Haimendorf, and some others, there has been no explicit discussion of the status of women in tribal society. Even in these works, the assessment of the status of women has been far from uniform" (Xaxa 2008, 113). Xaxa's argument provides that the condition of tribal woman in India demands further study in order to understand the actual status, for the condition of tribal woman in its authenticity has not been explored yet. It is generally perceived that woman enjoys a certain amount of freedom and authority in tribal society and an equal status is thereby granted to them. Nevertheless, continuity of the tradition of equal status for woman in tribal society is highly debatable considering the degree of assimilation of tribal society with the mainstream through the introduction of modern administration, economy, education, political system and cultural exchange. Tribal society has undergone massive transformation in terms of social values pertaining to the absorption of certain mainstream socio-cultural elements such as religious practices, system of marriage and means of economic sustenance. Majority of the tribal population in India has been ascribed the religious identity as Hindus through the process of Hinduization by way of acceptance of certain

religious rites and the patriarchal system of Hindu society has made its inroad into the once egalitarian society of the tribal. Conversion of the tribal into Christianity may also be seen as a means of introducing radical changes in social values as Xaxa maintains, "Both Hinduization and Christianization thus led to a number of restrictions on the kinds of freedom women enjoyed in the traditional social setting. In the case of Hinduization, such restrictions were part of the concern with maintaining respectability and status; in the case of Christianization, it had more to do with religious morals and values" (Xaxa 2008, *ibid.* 116).

Condition of woman in tribal society in the present context calls for a detailed study for the traditional value system and the equal status of both woman and man are gradually being eroded in the face of rapid modernization in terms of livelihood and sustenance. It has also undergone a paradigmatic shift from community living to nuclear system of family thereby adopting new idiom of cultural values.

Tribal woman in *Paraja* and *The Primal Land*

Novel has generally maintained to be a genre of literature of authentic representation without much regulative constraints and normative obligations, especially when compared to the anthropological texts of the colonial times which were produced keeping in mind of the interest of the authority in power. Writing fiction involves a greater sense of freedom as well as sensibility in the representation of the substance. It has the power of representing the nuanced realities of the subaltern, in this case the tribals of India. Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land* (2009) and Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* (2008) offer an insight into the core of tribal reality at the backdrop of certain degrees of exploitation of

the tribal by the outsiders and enforcement of modern system of administration posing greater threat to the sustenance of the tribals in their own homeland. The position of women in tribal society as represented in these two novels is worth examining by way of juxtaposing it against the colonial representation of tribal woman in the premise of the above discussed theoretical parameter.

The story of *Paraja* is set on the life of the Paraja tribe of Koraput region of Orissa at the backdrop of advancing modernity into the serene and primordial life of the tribe surrounded by forest and mountains. Jnanpith awardee Oriya writer Gopinath Mohanty wrote the novel in Oriya language and published for the first time in 1945 when India was still under British rule. His depiction of the tribal reality yet commands relevance with its exploration of the darker areas that remain untouched in the romanticized projection of tribal reality in majority of the mainstream literature of his contemporary times. Unlike the colonial texts, Mohanty offers an insight of the tribal reality in an authentic manner by focusing upon the predicament of his protagonists in the face of rapid modernization of the tribal lands and assimilation of the tribal life with the mainstream society manned by opportunists like the Sahukar Mahajan (Moneylender) and oppressors like the Forest guard and other government officials.

Land rights of the tribal holds cultural importance in tribal pantheon for every object in their land ranging from the rocks to the forest and rivers are worshipped. Land for the tribals is not simply individual property but a collective occupancy that corroborates to the community life of sharing and everything that inhabits the land forms the essence of their cosmology.

Tribals consider it their duty to guard the sacredness of every object of their land including the oral culture of folk beliefs and myths for man and nature coexist forming a symbiotic relationship in tribal worldview. However with the intrusion of external elements in the guise of modernity into the land of the tribal, their land rights come under certain threat as the tribal is dispossessed of their land the moment forest law is enforced by the state. In the novel, with the enforcement of forest law the life of the protagonist Sukru Jani gets baffled. Besides, at a symbolic level this may be understood as the first blow of patriarchal system on the life of the tribal against their traditional symbiotic relation with Mother Nature. This symbiotic relation of the tribal with Mother Nature is systematically damaged and replaced with modernist view of materialism.

The representation of tribal woman is mainly concentrated on two daughters of Sukru Jani namely Jili and Bili in the novel. Narrating the freedom of women in choosing their partner in tribal society Mohanty maintains,

“In the centre of the village was a hut which served as a dormitory for all the unmarried girls in the village, while little way off was the men's dormitory. It was an ancient Paraja custom for all unmarried boys and girls to sleep in their respective dormitories, rather than in their parents' homes.” (Mohanty 2008, 14-15)

Unlike the restrictive patriarchal system of the mainstream society, tribal society is based on the freedom of both the sexes allowing them the liberty of making individual decision of life. Jili meets her beloved Bagla in the village dormitory and their courtship begins. It is pertinent to note that in spite of the freedom to meet in isolation, both Jili and Bagla maintain

the sacredness of love without consummating physical intimacy. Jili also takes the liberty of being flirtatious with the forest guard which may be understood as another example of freedom tribal woman enjoys. Jili's carefree behavior with a stranger implies the liberal nature of tribal society where a woman is granted the freedom of making her choice unlike the restrictive patriarchal setup of the mainstream society. However, the forest guard fails to understand the inner dynamics of the tribal reality and takes Jili's Jovial as an opportunity of taking undue advantage, which is ostensibly thwarted by Jili. With her resistance to the forest guard's unwanted advancement, Jili represents the ability of every woman to question and transgress social boundaries when she is provided with the freedom of making her own decision.

Sahukar Mahajan introduces money into the life of the Paraja and robs them of all their belongings as the Paraja tribe is not adept in the use of money and Sukru Jani ends up becoming the bonded labour or 'Goti' under Sahukar. Sukru's daughter Jili is married to Sahukar which may be seen as a case of assimilation of the tribal with the mainstream. However, in this assimilation and negotiation of two cultures, the tribal suffers greater loss for Jili does not enjoy equal status in the house of Sahukar pertaining to the patriarchal setup of the mainstream society. Jili suffers like any other woman in a patriarchal system and her predicament is equated with the suffering of her father Sukru as a bonded labour under her husband, the Sahukar.

Jnanpith and Padmashree awardee Oriya writer Dr. Pratibha Ray's *Adi Bhumi* was published in 1993 and translated into English as *The Primal Land* by Bikram K. Das in 2001. The story of *The Primal Land* is set in the remote

mountainous forest areas of Malkangiri region of Koraput district of Southern Orissa inhabited by Bonda tribe. Ray has always been an exponent of feminist ideology and her narration of the story in this novel aligns with feminist reading of the tribal society. In this novel she portrays the life of the Bondas in the light of rapid modernization and awakening of the tribal consciousness about their identity at the backdrop of massive exploitation by the outsiders. She has given ample space to the discussion of the position of woman in Bonda society through the narration of a Bonda legend of Bundi Mahadei. Bundi Mahadei is considered to be the legendary female character who gave a definite direction to the life of Bonda tribe by way of uniting them and creating awareness about their identity. In her introduction to the Bonda society in *The Primal Land* (2009) she mentions,

“It has always been thus among the Bondas: when a boy is ten years old, he is married to a bride of twenty. Why have the Bondas adopted this strange custom? The age of the female is the age of Bundi Mahdei while the age of the male that of her pre-pubescent son. They are more mother and son than wife and man. And so the woman looks after everything while the man roams free.” (Ray 2009, 11)

Here the writer introduces a very interesting custom prevalent among the Bonda tribe in which a young male marries an aged woman and as a result entire responsibility of the family falls on the hands of the woman. It is generally assumed that being elder in age the Bonda wife commands authority in the family as well as the society which is totally opposite to the mainstream society where the husband's age is always desirable to be older than the wife.

Woman in a Bonda society has more responsibility owing to her older age while the husband is yet to attain his adulthood. Bonda woman is ascribed with peasantry and household work while the man's work is generally associated with hunting as Ray maintains, "When she is five years old she picks up the da to mow grass, to cut firewood and to harvest the crops. While the Bonda uses his arrow to kill, the Bonduni uses her da to sustain" (Ray 2009, *ibid.* 17). Here, Ray tells about the duties of a woman in Bonda society in a symbolic manner and suggests the division of works and duties among the Bonda man and woman. She indicates about the greater burden of works falls on the woman due to the unequal distribution of duties and a despondent life of a woman in Bonda society due to frequent occurrences of separation and desertion of the aged wife by the young husband.

Ray does not identify herself as an outright feminist writer but in her depiction of the Bonda life in the novel, she empathizes with the Bonda woman and their sufferings in the society. In order to show the predicament of Bonda woman, Ray portrays several female characters who suffer despite the popular claim of tribal society granting freedom to woman. The Bonduni does not enjoy equal status when it comes to decision making in the public domain. For example, the *Sindbore* which is a stone platform placed in the middle of the village where the members of the village council sit for making important decision concerning the village is exclusively a male domain. A Bonduni does not have access to the seats on the *Sindbore* for it is not expected of a Bonda woman to occupy important position in the society.

The Bondas are known as the naked people owing to the way of their dressing half naked. Pratibha Ray has provided justification to

the nature of their traditional attire by mentioning about the mythical tale of Sita-Takrani prevalent among the tribe. According to the myth one day in the forest some Bondunis answered to the call of a hornbill by laughing which was heard by the goddess Sita who was taking bath in a nearby stream. Goddess Sita thought that they had mocked her by laughing and out of anger she cursed,

"The whole world shall laugh at you in the *Kali* age, the evil time to come! Naked you shall be to every eye! And not a hair shall cover your heads, you shall walk with your heads shaven, bare from head to foot! But beware! If you try to cover up your nakedness or grow hair on your scalps, not a blade of grass will grow on these mountains! The Bonda people will be destroyed!" (Ray 2009, 25)

The deep-seated myth of Sita-Takrani is strictly maintained by the Bonda society till date and the Bondunis are prohibited from covering themselves for the fate of the Bonda tribe remains at the hands of the Bondunis. If the Bondunis defy the order of goddess Sita, her curse would befall upon them and the Bondas would be destroyed. However, ironically there is no social prohibition if a male Bonda wants to adopt a new dress code like wearing a dhoti emulating the plainsman. Oral myth of Sita-Takrani is thus designed to contribute to the patriarchal interest by depriving the woman of all possible opportunities for social empowerment and upward mobility.

Mention may also be made of the character of Adibari Toki who volunteers to work in a government project along with other two Bondunis. After joining the project she starts wearing sari which is perceived as an unwelcome gesture by a bonduni and a

downright insult to the age old social order of the Bondas. She is not accepted by her own people and rejected company when she visits the *Dingo* (dormitory for the young Bondas). Disheartened and deprived of respect, she elopes with a man of another society and disappears from the village. But the reaction of the Bonda society to her disappearance was shockingly indifferent and rather much of a relief as, “the Bondas concluded she had been devoured by a man-eating tiger. Well it had to happen. Was it surprising that the first sari-clad woman became the tiger's prey? The sin had been atoned for” (Ray 2009, *ibid.* 195). Adibari's attempt at social transgression costs her place in her own society for patriarchy and masculine strength rule even in a tribal society despite the popular perception of woman having a considerable social space in comparison to the mainstream society.

Both the novelists have made different representations of the position of woman in tribal society. Mohanty's representation is of a tribal woman who is capable of transgression and resistance when the society is liberal enough to grant freedom of making choice. But this freedom of woman is reduced with the intrusion of external influences from the mainstream society that culminates in restricting woman within the patriarchal constraints of social normativity. Mohanty's novel stands as a critique of the colonial representation of tribal society as uncivilized and unprogressive by demystifying the negativity attached to tribal life-world. On the contrary, Ray's depiction is of a tribal woman who has always been at loss in the face of patriarchal setup and social taboos. A

Bonda woman has to struggle for sustenance throughout her life playing the roles of a helping hand as a girl, a dutiful wife, a caring mother and an old woman deserted by her young husband. Sometimes she has to act even as an object of sexual gratification by other male members of the husband's family, especially when the husband is of young age.

Tribal society has been subjected to different layers of marginality and exploitation, and fallacious representation of tribal reality has led to the perpetuation of this process despite many attempts at correcting the deplorable condition of tribal society in India. Woman's position in tribal society has generally been perceived to be better in comparison to the patriarchal society of the mainstream Indian society owing to the free and liberal system prevalent among the tribal. However, in the present context of massive cultural exchange and social interaction between the tribal and the mainstream, traditional value system of the tribal society has undergone tremendous transformation. A systematic study with the employment of a definite methodology for the understanding of the inner dynamics of tribal reality and the long standing question of the status of woman in tribal society is of utmost necessity. This paper limits its study to the theoretical analysis of the politics involved in the representation of the tribal and tribal woman in two select novels which needs to be taken for further exploration of the present condition at the backdrop of massive identity consciousness and apparent resistance to the sense of marginality among the tribal.

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