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## **Survival in the face of Human Predicament: Family and Fortitude in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja***

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### **Abstract:**

Mohanty's *Paraja* depicts the lives of the Parajatribe in the hills and valleys of the Eastern Ghats in Orissa. It is a disturbing tale of inordinate suffering. Every single woe and worry in the lives of the characters leads to insurmountable odds. Circumstances coil and recoil, entangling them in a complicated mesh with no way out. But howsoever much unsettling and disquieting the tale of their unending misery and agony be, the will to survive is what makes these characters emerge victors out of their crisis and failures. The beauty of their perseverance is marked by a positive spirit to face life without taking recourse to crooked and twisted means. Their struggle is the straightforward and upright struggle teaching lessons of unlimited endurance and fortitude. But this is represented at the level of the family as a unit and not the community as a whole. The community in general is good and innocent but when it is threatened by the outside world and encroached upon, the corruption of the outside world corrodes their innocence, degrading and debasing them. The will to live and survive then takes a negative turn and the human goodness is bartered at the cost of other's lives.

**Keywords: Predicament, Suffering, Struggle, Family, Community, Survival.**

In *Paraja*, family emerges as glorious, sublime and the only support system which can save the human spirit to carry on while community as a structure disappoints and fails the individual. The characteristic simplicity and innocence get polluted partly out of fear of annihilation and partly out of the selfish needs of an individual to continue living out of the reach of harm and destruction. One reason that corruption and exploitation get a stronghold in the lives of people is the tendency to surrender and give in to these evil forces. Individual interests get the better of the community and the selfish ends lead to degradation and debasement of human life. But in *Paraja*, it is not the greed and selfish interests alone that force the members of the community to falsehood and evil. There are other very important factors which one cannot lose sight of. Illiterate and ignorant as the members of the Paraja community are, they have never been exposed to the outside world which is a world of knowledge and intelligence. The institutions of the civilised world stand in sharp contrast to their simple and innocent lives. The habit to live in peace and complete freedom without bothering about the rules of the state in their own fold of the hills and jungles has made them used to a pattern of life which they are always in fear of getting disturbed and damaged by the evil eye of the outside world. Any officer coming to the forest with his neat and clean looks and formal dress is awe inspiring to them and they propitiate him the way they propitiate their gods so that they continue living peacefully. The fear of knowledge, the outside big world,

the sophisticated language, the working of law and the harsh modes of punishment is so ingrained in their hearts that they will go to any length and any sort of compromise to avoid this. What they are best at is to serve, to offer and to pray. They can hardly resist or raise a voice. They cannot uproot the timidity that has settled in their hearts and followed them generation after generation, making them bow down before any entity which wields power and authority.

Apparently the plot of *Paraja* seems to be projecting the absurdity of human existence in a Beckettian way, but the difference lies in the fact that here the crisis is not of individual nature. The family as a bond of strong association, a refuge of warmth and emotional fulfilment and a support system is jeopardised and the fight has to be taken collectively in order to save it. The primordial ways and feelings of people as members of a community without a garb of affectation are set against the so-called civilised society and the threats that their simple enclosed world faces from the outside. The outside world is encroaching upon the unpolluted space that they own without a written or documental proof that is kept safe as the evidence of ownership. The association of these fellows with their land is an eternal one. It is not merely a patch of earth that happens to be their source of livelihood. The relationship is that one of kinship. It is the source of all their being. The very idea that the land belongs to them is the inspiration to continue living, as if the land breathes through their lungs and pumps blood in their veins. The world that they inhabit is a world away from the worries, anxieties and the threats that the outside world is gripped with. These simple people know no rules of the civilised world and yet know how to survive on meagre things. They have woven a pattern and developed a rhythm of life and without learning formal lessons are well trained to sustain and survive. They can smell danger and inhale the fragrance of friendship. They have faith in their sturdy bodies and no degree of hard work can test their strength. When they plough the field, the joy ripples through their sweating muscles, and the hope of a splendid harvest shines through their eyes.

It is not so that theirs is a lawless society. Their laws are blended in their rituals which are conducive to human happiness. The social and moral codes of conduct that operate in their society are devoid of sham and double standard. They have reduced the complications of life to the simplest possible, but there are certain social practices which give them a tough time and demand quite an energy and labour to be observed. One of such customs is the bride-price that the boy's family has to arrange to pay to the girl's family for marriage to take place. But this practice is not very hard and fast. Even if the boy and the girl choose to elope, the only condition that has to be fulfilled is the arrangement of the bride-price and everything is settled. But even this arrangement of money is an uphill task for these tribal communities as most of the time they are hard up and somehow manage to make ends meet.

Despite the difficulties and hardships, their lives are characterised with a sense of freedom and spontaneity. Their celebrations are marked by a gusto and abundance. Dancing and drinking continues the whole night on certain occasions. They lose themselves to music, dance and intoxication and drown themselves to exhilaration and ecstasy of an unburdened life. Love, passion and warmth of youth carry them away in an unrestrained flow. There are separate dormitories for girls and boys in the community. The younger members of every family are supposed to sleep in their respective groups. The boys will sing love songs and play on their musical instruments, attracting the hearts of girls and when night deepens the seekers of love get the desired company and a phase of courtship begins. In fact the parents encourage their children to go to their dormitories and thus find a suitable match for them. When the two hearts get drowned in the melody and magic of love they yearn to become one soul. They set out on the road to their dream land. The ticket to this world of wonderful

dreams is the bride money that the boy has to arrange for the girl. Sometimes a boy is accepted in the family as a servant till the time he has made up for the price by working for his in-laws. They have not known the laws of the outside world, which in the name of regulating things puts a check on human freedom and happiness. They fell trees for creating land because they think it is their right. They distil liquor because it is a source of income as well as used freely on occasions of celebrations, festivity and also to relax and chill out. They depend on things that they themselves produce and little do they know about license or permission to do things they think they need to do. No harm is intended, no greed is there, no malice for others but life should run gaily.

But the outside world is not far away from them. The officers keep visiting the hill side and jungle and their terror looms large. When one of them comes, he comes like a dreadful god who needs to be propitiated by the tribesmen. They run to him, fall at his feet and shower him with offerings. The terror of the outside world and people runs through their bones. Their highest fear is the fear of law and the horror associated with the idea of prison.

The opening chapter of the novel gives us a glimpse of the peaceful life that Sukru Jani, a Paraja, has content with his work, happy with his family, assured of his sturdy limbs even at fifty, hopeful of a bright future and never tired. Although his wife is no longer with him, as she became a prey to a wild tiger in the forest, he is comforted with the idea that her soul too would be content to see how the family is living in all happiness. Sukru Jani, his two sons Mandia Jani and Tikra and his daughters Jili and Bili constitute a small world of their own. They have a flair for work and enjoy doing things for each other. In the faces of his children, Sukru sees the hope of his wonderful future and the image of the prosperity of his lineage. His world is the world of hard labour but the labour is rewarded at the end of the day with the warmth of the family symbolically represented through their crowding before fire in the evening and basking themselves in the comfort of togetherness and inseparable ties of love and affection. They understand their world in terms of only two dimensions-work and joy. There is no third dimension to create complication and confusion and spoil the pure joy of their lives. As the head of the family, Sukru Jani has no worries but wonderful dreams of a future for his children and grandchildren: "Sukru Jani pulls out his half-smoked cigar from the niche between his ear and his head, lights it again and sucks the smoke in. a sense of peace and repose emanates from the quiet evening and opens hills and fills his being as he inhales" (*Paraja*7).

Their village called Sarsupadatis a cluster of thatched huts. To the other side lives another community called Dombs. In the fields they grow different kinds of millet such as mandia, olsi and kandulas which serve as food of these tribes. Theirs is the simplest possible life one can imagine or rather can hardly imagine. They have learnt to live with the minimum resources with a sense of natural contentment. Mango seeds are crushed into powder, boiled and eaten; wild hedge plants called hai-gaba are crushed for oil. Empty shells of dried bottle gourd serve as flask that they carry to work filled with gruel. Dried palm leaves are used for making umbrellas. There are earthen pots used for cooking and eating purposes. Containers are made of leaves sewn together for storing food grains. Men have strips of loincloth to wear and women folk have sarees which they hang to the thatch. Since most of the huts are very small, they have divided the space to serve as store room, drawing room and even for cooking. Usually there are not sufficient numbers of hand sewn containers and the food grains are piled up or scattered on the mud floor. This is the picture of a home of a Paraja. It is like a dark cell with no light and no good space to enjoy. But the joy of a Paraja is not dependent on the facilities that a luxuriant life can provide. His space is the sprawling land laughing and singing with healthy harvest. He draws comfort from the fact that as long as his

relationship with his land is strong, the blessings of life will continue for him. Back from work it is not the home itself in terms of its physical existence that matters but the warmth, affection, ties and the family as an inseparable bond of togetherness embrace his being and fill his tired limbs with freshness. The darkness inside the hut little matters as there is sufficient light that bathes their hearts with the joy of existing in utmost freedom. The things scattered in disorder do not add to his discomfiture as there is an order, a pattern, a rhythm of life that he has inherited from the world of Nature:

The things have been piled together or thrown about in disorder, but he is familiar with this disorder and he likes it, as he likes the smoke from his hearth which lingers under the thatch and chokes him at cooking-time-for his house has no window and there is not even a chink in the walls. He loves his home, for everything in it is his own. (3)

Sukru Jani often lies dreaming. He wants to see his children get married and have a bright future with sufficient land to cultivate. And he can see his dream on its way to materialization. As per the custom of the Paraja community, his elder son Mandia and daughter Jili are seeing the prospective bride and groom for them. Mandia loves Kajodia and Jili is infatuated with a young man Bagla. Sukru is eager to create more and more land by cleaning the forest. Everything seems to be sailing smoothly when suddenly the evil ensnares this lovely family. The forest officer happens to pass by their village. A lascivious fellow as he is, he would loiter around the pool side where women of the village go for taking bath. The youth in the Paraja community is not wayward and lecherous. The community has its tradition of allowing the boys and girls to choose their respective match by spending time together but it is not the case that they indulge in debauchery and obscene orgies. They know their limits:

They do not have sexual innocence, true-the dormitories of *dhangdas* and *dhangdis* (young adivasi boys and girls are their socially sanctioned springboards of sexual freedom-but their sexual freedom rests on free will, not force. Sexual freedom, yes; sex trade, never. The latter is even tantamount to the desecration of their deity, *Dharmu* (the just One). (P. Mohanty134)

To an outsider, skimpily clad girls bathing in the open is a real feast. The girls are full of life. They would laugh and cut jokes among themselves about the behaviour of the forest officer. They would show their displeasure and disapprove of the indecent advances of an outsider who is a slave to his lust. But as bad luck would have it, he gets enamoured of the beauty and youthful hue of Jili and makes up his mind to enjoy her. He knows it very well that he can get his desire easily fulfilled as the community can easily be manipulated.

The village headman warns Sukru of the consequences if he continues felling trees without permission. Till now Sukru had never known that he was not free to use the land and the trees in the forest the way he liked. He always believed that the forest belonged to his community and they could make use of anything they liked without any check. In order to avoid any trouble he goes to the officer who is staying at the headman's house loaded with gifts and offerings. The cunning officer sees the opportunity coming to his door. He allows him to fell trees, thinking the old man will be easy to convince once he is given the favour. But when the officer sends his proposal to Sukru through Kau Paraja, the headman, the dignity of Sukru is hurt and he gets furious and even attacks Kau ferociously. The village people warn him of the anger of the officer and the dire consequences that may ensue. But

Sukru cannot sacrifice his daughter at the altar of his dreams. His love of land is not beyond the love of family.

The lust of the officer unsatisfied and the lingering sense of humiliation following him out of the act of defiance on the part of a Paraja makes him return to the village all set to crush the old man Sukru and his family. The axe of law falls on his neck and he is asked to pay a big fine for cutting down trees. Sukru pleads the senior officers and very innocently tells the truth that it was the forest officer himself who gave him the permission to fell trees. But little does Sukru know that the truth is not merely told but has to be proved. Nobody helps him. Even the patch of jungle cleared by the Dombs, Istifan and Soloman, is proved the work of Sukru himself as the headman including other villagers witness against him. One wonders how the simple and innocent community of hill people could stoop to such an act of blatant lie. But the fact remains that the dread of the law is fatal for them. The feeling of utter powerlessness before authority is what they have always experienced and cannot escape it.

The officers laugh at Sukru and leave, warning him of dire consequences if he failed to pay the fine. The sum of money that he has to pay is frightening even to imagine for a Paraja. It is as much as three scores of money going by the counting method of the illiterate community. Sukru could see very clearly what was in store for him. The outside world had intruded into his peaceful home and blissful dream and was on its way to smash everything he had built up with love and care. Such dread of authority in itself is symbolic of the truth of utter powerlessness in case of the have-nots and the downtrodden. The inherent dread of law and power tells the story of their exploitation and subjugation generation after generation. They know it very well that the law out there is to crush them and not to safeguard them. It has been an experience of a lifetime.

As a people they are courageous, sturdy, hardworking and fearless in their own world of peace and harmony. They work hard throughout the day. They go hunting in the jungle filled with wild and ferocious animals. But they are powerless. When they fall into the clutches of the outside world, there is no way they can escape. They do not know how to resist, to raise a voice or to fight back. All they have learnt is to bow down, to beseech, to pray and to ask for forgiveness. Thus the fight in their case is never a fight at the community level. It is a fight at the family level or rather at the individual level. In sheer absence of power and the lack of rights or the lack of knowledge to use those rights and the utter ignorance of the tricky and shrewd ways of the world, the struggle of a family or an individual to save itself from destruction at the hand of the exploitative machinery becomes all the more significant and meaningful. Like all tribal men, Sukru knows the fate of his family. But his real strength is his family. Despite all odds, the will to survive never dies. His home, howsoever small and humble is the place which brings him comfort. As the outside world is all set to pounce on his family, the home spreads its affectionate arms and enwraps all the members in its fold of warmth and love:

They closed the door on the world outside and in the darkness of their dingy shelter father, sons and daughters hung from each other's necks and sobbed aloud while the mandia gruel remained untouched in the gourd-shell flasks. The men's axes lay outside the door; they had not even bothered to put them on the veranda.

And thus it was that in this land of hills and forests, in an unmapped corner of the wide world, luckless men and women who lived on castaway mango stones and hid their nakedness in bits of rag huddled together under the torrent of misery pouring down on their heads, and wept.

Their tears soaked the earth but were powerless to melt human hearts.  
And their gods laughed. (*Paraja*37)

Their misery is frightening. The pathos is heart rending. It seems as if all the doors have been closed on them. Their closing the door of the house and weeping inside together is symbolic of the idea that they least expect any help from anyone. They know that all of them have to fight this battle of survival on their own as a family. This is the only aperture of hope in the pitch darkness of despair and desolation. Their gods are similar to the gods of Hardy who amuse themselves at the plight of human beings. But the characters do not stop dead. They run the race. They pant, gasp for breath, stumble, falter but keep running even to their knowledge that they cannot win it at any cost. And this is what saves them from being losers: "The pathos only serves, however, to highlight the symphony of existence. Flowers bloom only to droop; huts crumble and dreams are swept away like cobwebs, but all this does not invalidate the act of blossoming. Huts have to be built and dreams must be dreamt. Life goes on" (Das vii-viii).

The villagers sit together and it is decided that Sukru should go to the money lender, Ram Bisoi, in the village Thotaguda and borrow money from him by offering himself and his sons to serve as debt-bound servants for him. Sukru realises that there is no way out. Even if a lifetime of slavery can restore his peace and safety, he will do that rather than fighting face to face the unknown and unseen devil of authority and power. It is a great irony that he is ready to slave interminably for his freedom that is threatened and challenged. This is the veritable trap that the family has caught into. Accompanied by *Naik*, the village headman, *Barik*, the village watchman, Deepu Chauhan and Phaul Domb, Sukuri finally goes to the Sahukar. He and his younger son, Tikra Jani put their thumb impressions on the papers of the deed for a sum of fifty rupees that proves to be the deed of their destruction.

Community is exposed in *Paraja* to its nakedness. The fellow villagers play foul on Sukuri. They take money from him saying the officers will get furious even seeing him while they can manage to get the fine reduced by falling at the feet of the authorities. They somehow convince the officers that they have managed to collect not more than fifteen rupees. Their words are not hard to believe as the officers know how miserably poor they are. The officers are appeased. They divide the rest of the money shamelessly between them. The same money which took away the freedom of a family was being mercilessly spent by these men who got it for free.

Like Sukru's dreams, his family also shatters. Mandia Jani, the elder son is left to take care of the sisters, the house, the land and crop as his father and the younger brother move to the Sahukar's village to serve as his servant. Sahukar is evil incarnate. His greed for money and lust for land knows no bounds. He is mean, lecherous, rude and inhuman in his every action. He will make his servant toil day and night and give them only a meagre food and a dirty and dingy space for lodging in return. He will make sure that every iota of energy of his slaves is consumed and squeezed to his maximum benefit and will hardly allow them any respite or leave even for important occasions such as festival of harvesting. But such is the bond that a *Paraja* shares with the land that the mere touch of it is an antidote to every kind of suffering. Despite the fact that now Sukru and Tikra are slaves and they work on somebody else's land, it cannot take away from them the cheerful spirit with which they set out to work and the way they immerse themselves into the act of working to the point of being forgetful of everything else around.

Same is the case with Mandia Jani at home. He is a man with undefeatable spirit. To him the great solace comes from the land which is the choicest in the village. Like his father he also shares a kind of kinship and bond with his land. Somehow it becomes a source of strength in the most difficult times. He has a firm belief that in case everything else fails, the land is there never to disappoint. It is always there to fall back upon. The land is woven around his existence. It is the blood and marrow in his bones. The idea of survival is connected to the existence of the land. It gives the immense energy, fortitude and perseverance to continue struggling and not to give in:

The rice-field was a legacy from his ancestors. Generations of his forefathers had laboured on that land and the touch of their hands had made the soil smooth and soft. To Mandia, it was no mere piece of land, but a record of the history of those past generations, of their bygone tales of sorrow and rejoicing and of tradition and change. (*Paraja*63)

Mandia Jani, apart from working on the field, distils liquor. In fact he is trying his level best to collect money from whatever possible source he can think of for bride price to pay Kajodi's father in order to marry her. But he is caught by the authorities; tried in the court and asked to pay a huge fine of fifty rupees. The money has to be arranged anyhow. He is also forced to be Sahukar's servant. Youthful Kajodi cannot wait endlessly for Mandia and is drifted toward Bagla who finally elopes with her to marry her. It is such a disgrace to the family and an emotional shock to both Mandia and his sister Jili. But they have learnt to cope with predicament as they have learnt to manage the vagaries of weather. Come what may they keep on going:

Optimism comes naturally to the tribesman; he is never quite cured of it. Or maybe, when one has lived long enough among the mountains, one is no longer aware of the peaks and troughs of existence, and everything appears to be level ground. After centuries of trial, the Paraja has learned to be like earth, patient and enduring. (106)

Sukru cannot see his children suffer like this. He is worried about his daughters who are left alone at home while he and his sons are serving as servants to the Sahukar. Despite his unwillingness to do so, he mortgages his "two rice-fields" to the Sahukar which are "like the ribs in his chest" (191). Mandia has his doubts and fears. He knows that once the land is in the clutches of the money lender, they will never get it back. To add to Sukru's woes *Barik* comes to him on behalf of the village headman conveying the warning of the rent-collector that if he fails to pay back his pending rents, his land will be taken. Meanwhile, Jili and Bili are forced to leave the village to become labourers as their land remains fallow and they are left with no grain-stock to feed themselves. The brave girls had fought with circumstances with men of the family by their side. Now they saw the dreadful face of poverty from close quarters and had to find a way out for survival.

To Jili and Bili, life as labourers in a camp offers a new experience and especially to Jili who is jilted in love. The Supervisor is a handsome young man. Lifestyle in the camp is without any restraint. The womenfolk would easily go to the Supervisor in the night for the gifts he would give them. But he is not rude to them. Jili resists the temptation but the frustration of the first love leads her to further disillusionment as she surrenders to her own desires of the body by offering herself to the supervisor. The incidents from this moment onward in the story lead to unending misery and suffering for the old man, Sukru. The Sahukar is not ready to free any of his sons who are strong and sturdy. The old man is no

longer an indentured labourer for the precious land he has mortgaged to the Sahukar but this freedom is all the more a cause of sadness when his sons are still slaves and he is too helpless to do anything for them. But he considers it a disgrace to let his daughters suffer and work as labourers. He goes out in search of them and brings them home. Together all of them work with a spirit of perseverance and courage but it is really difficult to eke out a living. The only good thing that happens to them in this adverse phase of their lives is the arrival of a sturdy and stout young man, Nandibali who offers to become Sukru's *goti* for his daughter Bili. The Sahukar has his greedy eye on Sukru's land as well as his daughter Jili. While Mandia and Tikra again start secretly distilling liquor to collect enough money to pay to the Sahukar to earn their freedom and the land from him, the Sahukar is all set to tempt their sister, Jili through the help of Madhu Ghasi. Jili's degradation has already started. It is a great irony that it was for her honour and dignity that Sukru earned the wrath of the officers and sold his and his son's freedom to the devil Sahukar and again it was she who by becoming the mistress of the same Sahukar had given the greatest torture to her father and brothers. Furious as Sukru is, he considers her dead for him and Mandia was to be stopped with much difficulty from going to the Sahukar and chopping his head off. Misery on misery piles up till the worst happens. Even after the two brothers have collected enough money to pay to the Sahukar and get back their land, he is not ready to let go the land that he came to possess so easily and was about to plant oranges on it. The issue is taken to the court. The innocent and ignorant Sukru and his family is badly disillusioned by the court and the unfair dealings of the authorities that seem to assist and encourage the manipulative schemes of the Sahukar. Even the people of his community, as they stand in utter awe of Sahukar and his wickedness, are of no help to Sukru. The family is beguiled by the tricking and cunning people in the court whom the Sahukar has bribed heavily. Confusion is deliberately created regarding the date of hearing for the case and he fails to appear before the court on the appointed date with the result that the case is dismissed. His pleadings, requests and prayers to men in power to tell that he has been misguided meet with abuse and humiliation.

The only option that is left to Sukru and his sons is to go to the Sahukar and request him to return their land. To imagine life without land is something inconceivable to them. Mandia has already made up his mind that he will go to any extent to get back the land now that the court and law have denied them justice. Sahukar intoxicated with his incorrigible arrogance only knows a language that can ravish the dignity and self-respect of others:

Get up! Get out! I'm to give you the land back, am I? You rascals! Take me to court, would you? And what did the court decide? Are you going or shall I have you sent to jail?...Yes Jili! And isn't there another called Bili at home still? Bring her to me. I've taken the land; I have taken one sister; and I shall take the other too. I shall take your wives; I shall drive you from court to court through the length of the country. I shall make you sweat out your lives as s, and I shall rub your noses in the dust. If I don't, my name is not Ramachandra Bisoi! (372)

And this is too much. The young blood of Mandia boils with the fury erupting out of a lifetime of suppressed humiliation and hurt resulting in a hurricane of violence that smashes the head of the pig-headed exploiter to the smithereens. He raises his axe and brings it down on the head of the Sahukar. They go to the police station and surrender asking for the punishment for the murder they have committed. The novel ends on a note of pathos and pessimism but the story of Sukru is not without suggestions of noble suffering, patient endurance and constant perseverance without taking recourse to wicked and unfair means. The tribesmen have the fear of law but they do not twist and manipulate it like the so-called

civilized men do to suit their ends and to deprive the innocent of their right to justice. “When the system fails in justice, violence is justified...The individual cannot go on suffering in silence”(Spivak xii).

The novel can be a record of the tragic suffering of a family in a helpless and powerless community exposed to exploitation by the outside world which makes inroads into their simple joys and carefree life. But what makes the novel special is an undercurrent of the spirit of perseverance against all odds that is suggested poetically through man’s association with Nature and his ability to draw comfort from seemingly ordinary and insignificant things. There is “ a tenacious aliveness even at the most depressing or degrading hour of the novel’s action” which “ owes its origin to the novelist’s empathy with the tribal ethos” (P. Mohanty 139).The way the tragic grandeur of the suffering of the family has been portrayed in the novel is what makes it a beautiful piece of writing. It very powerfully evokes the capability of the characters to encounter the oppressive forces with a characteristic degree of forbearance and fortitude. The strength comes from family as a bond, as a unit, as a fold that stands against all storms collectively and bravely.

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