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Centre Vs. Periphery: The Flux of Identity and the Tribal World

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Abstract:

In mainstream literature tribals are conceived as the 'other'. They often occupy a marginal, ex-centric position, are often neglected and experience trouble in finding their own voice. The marginalization of individuals by racist forms and the oppression of class system are widespread with far-reaching consequences. A marginalized group has less access to wealth, power and status. Individuals experience such oppressive forms in diverse ways and it is important to closely observe their impact in order to disrupt them. In an attempt to voice silent and marginalized subjects, Maitreyi Pushpa's *Alma Kabutari* explores feminine difference as an excess term that challenges the notion and representation of tribals specially the Kabutara women who are treated not as humans but as bodies in popular culture. The Kabutaras are living on the fringes of the mainstream world, still they are threatened at times to vacate their place, the police raids are frequent in their *bastis*, and they stay in constant fear of the police and other officials. Parajas of Mohanty also face similar situations that lead them towards self-destruction, and loss of identity.

The present paper challenges this attitude of the mainstream society that deprives the tribals of their right to live with dignity. Their collective experiences, community interests and cultural values are always put under erasure. The paper attempts to bring out the pain and trauma that these tribals have to endure while struggling against the oppressive tactics of the mainstream world but their indomitable spirit never lets them to succumb to the circumstances and ultimately they assert their own identity.

Keywords: Marginalisation, mainstream, ex-centric, community, oppression, culture.

The conceptual model of a tribe is that of an isolated, self-sustaining viable society. This type of tribal society is an intangible construct and not a phenomenal reality, although in India, we do have some tribal societies which were very near to this ideal construct until recently, e.g., the Andaman Islanders or the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. The majority of tribes in India have been in varying degrees of contact with the outside world. Various anthropologists, sociologists and so-called architects of the tribal world have differently talked about the tribal positioning. Verrier Elwin suggests that tribals should be kept isolated in their hills and forests (9). G.S. Ghurye argues that tribals are nothing more than backward caste Hindus (404). For D.N. Majumdar the cultural identity of the tribals as far as possible should be retained. He is afraid that if the isolation is broken tribals would lose their ethnic identity (53-54). B eteille describes Indian tribes as "tribes in transition" (299).

The post-colonialists like Franz Fanon and Edward Said perceive identities not as fixed and embedded, but as continuously shifting. Although race, ethnicity and nationality emerge as the solid substratum, which helps us to shape a sense of ourselves, but these are not, nor have they ever been, constant. These are always being formed and reformed in different patterns, and are in a process of continual interaction and change as per the socio-historical circumstances. It is for this reason that identities also remain volatile.

This transformation of identity is apparent in Mahasweta Devi's *Bashai Tudu*, where the protagonist stands outside the Naxalite movement as well as the constitutional political parties, to fight exclusively and doggedly for the cause of agricultural labourers. In the process, he gradually converts from a human being to a mythical figure. The jotedars like Pratap Goldar try to rule the destiny of the peasants, but led by Bashai these tribals learn to assert their identity, their culture, and ways of life. Bashai is martyred every time a jotedar tries cheating the peasants. The process of colonization brought about speedy transformation while forcing different cultures into new forms, unfixing the so far static customs that were deeply rooted into the ethos and thus creating new identities. The post-colonialists attempt to deconstruct the primordial models of nation, culture, and selfhood, and question these hybrid and absorbent formulations based on displacement, dislocation, and migration. According to James Clifford, "they invite a reconception . . . of familiar notions of ethnicity and identity" (36).

Romen Basu's *This Land is Ours* depicts tribals as experiencing the expansion of political control over their lives by the state, greater integration into the market economy, and increased domination by the processes of modernization and Hinduization. Though these processes met resistance but with varying degrees of success. In the contemporary scenario the adivasi identities are devised within a larger system of cultural dominance and subordination, and that they acquire different values according to the changing contingencies of power. Though, this type of identity formation offered by postcolonial theory is not unbiased but engaged and self-contradictory. It interrogates the concepts of homeland, nation, people, and the orient that have lost exclusiveness, stability and purity, due to their continuous contact with other cultures. In his essay "Interrogating Identities: The Real Me" Homi K. Bhabha states that "the question of identity can never be seen 'beyond representation'" (6). He further elucidates:

The Construction of identity as descending from 'two . . . traditions in the discourse of identity' the philosophical tradition of identity as the process of self-reflection in the mirror of (human) nature: and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of nature/culture. (5)

By the "philosophical tradition" Bhabha refers to the sense we have of a distinctive identity which is not influenced by outside factors. "The anthropologist, Marcel Mauss, the art historian, Jacob Burckhart, and the literary critic, Stephen Greenblatt, have argued that this self-fashioning has an origin and a history that began in the Renaissance and is an effect of new modes of representation" (qtd. in Richards 20).

While speaking about the process of modernisation among the tribals in the border-states of India Roy Burman rightly maintains that, tribals live among the non-tribals, but

hardly share a common life. Their contacts are few and formal. In fact, according to him, the tribals in urban areas are in neither of the two worlds fully. Many of them adopt the technology, and skill of the modern world, still retaining the emotions of the tribal world (109-120). This process of modernisation has consciously or unconsciously trespassed into their lives and customs, though the tribals differ from others in their social system. The tribals of Kerala as depicted in Narayan's *Kocharethi* are living at different stages of economic development—some are still at the hunting and food gathering stage and lead a nomadic life while others practise shifting cultivation and a few are settled agriculturalists. A microscopic minority is working in plantations. The tribal communities who are generally educationally more advanced are at a higher level of economic development than those who are educationally backward. In the contemporary scenario, when the development initiatives and other activities direct towards mainstreaming the tribal societies, the issue of ethnicity comes to occupy a centre stage. According to Cohen, "It is in cross boundary transaction and discourse that identity and its predicates may become explicitly contingent, 'other-referential', and relativistic" (1-2). When we talk of changing face of the Paraja society in the backdrop of developmental initiatives, we need to understand how the Parajas draw and maintain boundaries around them and how come they maintain and construe their identity as detached to any other tribal community as did the Malayarayars in Kerala. The Kabutaras in Maitreyi Pushpa's *Alma Kabutari* also face the same dilemma. Some of the Kabutaras like Ram Singh (Alma's father), Rana and Alma herself attempt to cross the gulf between Kajjas and Kabutaras by means of education but fail. They are humiliated and fail to assert their true selves and remain distanced from both the communities.

The folklore that is deeply rooted in the lifestyle and culture of tribal communities is the main binding force within these groups. Without culture specific myths and folktales we cannot imagine the tribal world, as these are the spice of the culture in which they are ingrained. Their habitat in the midst of natural bounty provides them a specific identity of being the sons of the soil. Parajas like Sukru Jani prefer being *gotis* to the Sahukar than mortgaging their land. They celebrate each and every moment of their life in spite of the difficulties that mar their happiness at times. The Malayarayars of *Kocharethi* dwell in the pepper rich Western ghats of Kerala. As depicted by G.S. Jayasree in the translator's introduction to the text:

The novel maps the adivasi's changing perceptions of land and its ownership . . . the innocence of a people who did not even have the notion land was 'property' and that they could be alienated from it. To the adivasis . . . there was no question of acquiring individual rights over the land. The land was inseparable from their sense of collective identity; they were one with it and celebrated this union in all rites of passage. (*KAW* xvi)

The above passage makes it clear that identity implies self-knowledge, and since the self does not exist in isolation, but is embodied and located socially and culturally, the identity is a cultural construct. It refers to the way in which people understand themselves and want others to understand them as they actually are. Conceptually, identity is in a state of flux. Earlier scholars like Goffman saw identity as interactional and negotiable, having a game like

character (qtd. in Jacobsen 67-68). This perspective is fallacious as it sees individuals and groups as powerful players having control over their destinies. The reality, however, points to the power dynamics which plays an important role in the assertion and authentication of the identity. Identity does have an interactional character but it is not always negotiable because there are inequalities in the resources available to the various parties involved in the interaction where identity issue is crucial.

For a long time, the tribals/aboriginals in different parts of the world were hardly able to 'negotiate' their claim to identities. They were renamed and classified without much regard to their own sensibilities and concerns. As evidenced in Narayan's *Kocharethi*, "the family names of the Malayararyars were obtained from some tree or rock near which the house stood" (KAW xx). In Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, there are instances when tribals are treated not as humans but as *gotis/serfs* that are bound to the Sahukar. This hierarchal set up of mainstream society is being challenged time and again. In this connection, Linda Hutcheon suggests that the challenge to privileged position is characteristic of both post-modern and post-colonial theories and critical concerns, and observes that:

What we currently call post-modernism has entitled a revaluing of difference in culture: difference in terms of gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexual preference. The ex-centric or off-centric is valued over the centre. (51)

In mainstream literature tribals are conceived as the 'other'. They often occupy a marginal, ex-centric position, are often neglected and experience trouble in finding their own voice. A marginalized group has less access to wealth, power and status. In an attempt to voice silent and marginalized subjects, Maitreyi Pushpa's *Alma Kabutari* explores feminine difference as an excess term that challenges the notion and representation of tribals specially Kabutaras who are treated not as humans but as bodies in popular culture. Kabutaras are living on the fringes of the mainstream world, still they are threatened at times to vacate their place, the police raids are frequent in their *bastis*, and they stay in constant fear of police and other officials. Parajas of Mohanty also face similar situations that lead them towards self-destruction, and loss of identity. Challenging this attitude of the mainstream society that deprives tribals of their right to live with dignity, Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* discusses that there is tremendous power in the margins or in-between spaces. It is at these locations where collective experiences, community interests and cultural values are negotiated (2).

The terms 'centre' and 'periphery' were originally advanced by Edward Shils. He reflects that every society contains a 'centre' or 'central zone' where the "order of symbols, of values and beliefs" which governs that society is contained (3). That centre is composed of institutions, individuals, and actions. Outsiders of the centre are termed as the 'periphery' by Shils. Tribal literature questions power structures that subsume tribal identity. Writers like Mahasweta Devi, Maitreyi Pushpa, Gopinath Mohanty, Romen Basu and Narayan, while dealing with tribal subjects reveal that no power centre is permanent or static. As Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* remarks, "America leads to Africa, the nations of Europe and Asia meet in Australia, the margins of the nation displace the centre; the people of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis" (6-7). This can be asserted with

reference to Maitreyi Pushpa's *Alma Kabutari* where, initially the protagonist Alma falls victim to the ensnarement of the upper caste Kajjas but as soon as she assumes a position of power through her alliance with Shriram Shastri, she rises to the occasion and turns the tables on them. Shastri is not able to think, read and act without her help. His complete dependence on her shows this power fluctuation. Later when he is killed by his opponents she opts for party candidature and thus becomes the centre of power.

The tribals often occupy a marginal, ex-centric position. Margin refers to the limits, often crossed within the minds of victims, to escape physical and psychological trauma. Marginality can either be imposed or actively chosen. In Mohanty's *Paraja* Jili and Bili pretend to adopt societal values in order to fit into that society. After some traumatic experiences they begin a quest for their hybrid identity. They are ready to encounter undauntingly the challenges of life. The recovery of their identity in itself is a remarkable achievement for those tribals who had no appreciable support from their own people. These tribals are victims and must overcome many obstacles in order to be survivors.

Self-realization of the victim position is an important step towards transformation. Pushpa's *Alma Kabutari* tries to break up hierarchies and encourage a creative co-existence of differences. Linda Hutcheon remarks: "Difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion" (61). Alma in *Alma Kabutari* is able to reconstruct her identity and give herself a voice that will be heard in times to come, and this instructs the way to survival. She is able to acknowledge and refuse victimization. Tribal writings attack the mainstream power structures and establish an inclusive order to incorporate one another and create a harmonious sense of interdependence. This kind of harmonious complementary and creative co-existence of dualities is what these writings attempt to attain. Survival in the case of tribals is not a mere continuance of life, but a challenge to better their personal existence.

In this consumerist popular culture everything including tribals is reduced to products. They are singled out as products, items to be decorated and used as commodities. In *Alma Kabutari* Mansaram exploits Jangalia's prowess in stealing for his own selfish ends, also keeps an eye on the physical charms of Kadambai, his wife. As soon as Mansaram's whims are satisfied he insinuates his enemy against Jangalia and gets him killed, so that he can exploit his wife. Mansaram's friend Kehar Singh does not hesitate to trade in women in order to earn his living. He also has designs to take advantage of the Kabutara skill in brewing liquor. He tries his best to allure Mansaram with this project by showing a bright vision of the forthcoming days when Mansaram will turn into a beneficiary for the Kabutaras, will rule them as an emperor with Kadambai by his side as his empress. Kabutaras' skill in brewing will fill their pockets, and Kabutaras in turn will be able to get a social standing, and even the police would not be able to lay hands on them.

Mohanty's lurking annoyance and denunciation of social oppression is exposed through the portrayal of Sukru's family at the hands of a non-tribal moneylender, the Sahukar. The Sahukar emerges as a representative of a materialistic civilization that is gradually impinging upon and engulfing a primeval culture. Growing materialism holds the tribals in its clutches, erases their innocence, and brings about their destruction and humiliation. The novel *Paraja*

is about the unwritten tribal history, experiences and culture which are fast vanishing. The Paraja as well as the other tribes are being evicted from their land and a cultural and economic invasion is taking place. The fear of the Sahukar, poverty, deprivation and materialistic concerns have eroded their solidarity and strength.

Subaltern studies as history from the lower rungs of society is marked by a freedom from the restrictions imposed by the nation state. Once it becomes possible for the subaltern to imagine the state, he transcends the conditions of subalternity. It is interesting in this context to note that subaltern writings are read in translations either in English or in the dominant regional languages. Narayan's *Kocharethi* encloses a space of transition from the colonial to the post-colonial within the imagined boundaries of the nation state. Education as a necessary ploy for moulding homogenous identities comes packaged with the promises of equality and liberty. But the subaltern aspires for education in order to be liberated from the land and its woes. The novel is filled with the new subaltern dream of a government job. Narayan makes a feeble attempt to parody this process of 'modernizing' the tribal. The discourse of nationalism with its dichotomies of material/spiritual, inner/outer, resurfaces again and again in the novel with obvious privileging of the spiritual and inner. The novel reveals the slow acculturation of the native into the economy, culture and politics of the nation state.

Kocharethi depicts the plight of the native subaltern caught in the regulative politics of the infallible nation state, and betrayed by the promise of the participatory citizenship, struggling to find voice amidst the homogenized Babel of nationalist discourses. The Malayararyars are highly dependent on land for their livelihood. They cultivate paddy on cleared land, completely rely on seasonal rains for cultivation and subsequently have to safeguard it from the attack of wild animals. Famine, drought and diseases like smallpox add to their misery. Adding to this are the foolish and thoughtless actions of the people leading to an enormous loss of life and property. The exploitation from the people down in the village is awful and they are callous enough to cheat the illiterate araryars. Commercial exploitation is quite but natural. Tribals like Kunjamundan and his son are repeatedly being cheated by the crafty villagemen due to their lack of knowledge about counting. The Malayararyars gradually become conscious of the need for education. Kochuraman meets Krishna Pillai who helps the araryars. As a result many Arayar children including Kochuraman's daughter Parvathi get educated. Education changes Parvathi's outlook, now she rejects the traditional customs of the Malayararyars. She gets a job in Cochin and starts earning and falls in love with a boy named Padmanabhan. Without bothering to take the approval of her parents she ties the knot with him. This change in her attitude which is an outcome of getting educated is not accepted by the generation of Kochuraman, who strictly adhere to the conventional and established ways of life and for whom the acceptance of modernity is beyond comprehension. On the other hand, the educated younger generation easily adapts to the new way of living.

The novel embraces and enhances the task of colonial modernity to instill middle class values and bourgeois virtues into the gendered 'national' subaltern subject. The new woman, conscious of her identity, cuts off her roots. As Parvathi, the educated subaltern migrates to the city, the narrative, in an allegorical twist leaves Kochuraman and Kunjipennu stranded in

a government hospital, at the mercy of state welfare aids. Narayan assumes a nationalist identity by which he sees education of subaltern women as necessary but not at the cost of losing the essence of their identity, dignity and culture.

The ideological distance from Javani and Ira to Kunjipennu is a space articulated by a translated colonial discourse, which constructs the woman as the upholder of tradition, an embodiment of its representation. Kunjipennu sees Parvathi's education as encroaching upon her feminine essence. In this sense Kunjipennu is made to fit into the stereotypical association of womanhood with ignorance. Though the need for education for women is presented as imperative, the anxiety that it might devalue feminine virtues like chastity, modesty, patience and devotion persists. There is also an encroachment of Hindu signs and symbols into the tribal discourse. Pushpa's *Alma Kabutari* also refers to the intriguing impact of English language learning on the lives of Ram Singh, Alma and her fiancé Rana. Their ultimate fate is no better than that of their ancestors. Moreover, education makes them a misfit in both worlds. They neither completely belong to their own world of the Kabutaras nor that of the upper caste Kajjas. They occupy a limited space and suffer inner and outer turmoil and yet cannot withdraw from what they had been accustomed to i.e. their illusory world of perception.

Initially 'aboriginality' was used as an orientalizing and othering device by the colonialists. However, as the fourth world politics gained stronghold, the self-identities of the aboriginals gained legitimacy. The boundaries change as per the change in time. As they become more permeable, the revivalistic movements and the punctuated cultural diacritical markers are seen as the self-authenticating identities of different groups which make each of them exclusive. This exclusiveness is not just a reaction to globalization but as the result of the empowerment of the categories of people who enjoyed little or no power with respect to their own identities.

The texts undertaken for this study reflect that undermining of old-established authority of tribal morals and customs that tends on the one hand to completely demoralize the native and to make them unamenable to any law or rule, while on the other hand, by destroying the whole fabric of tribal life, it deprives them of many of their most cherished diversions, ways of enjoying life and social pleasures. The gradual decline in tribal solidarity and folk legal sanctions robs the younger generation of their moorings and places them aimlessly wandering in an alien world. More often they exhaust their arts, crafts, music and dancing, that are the essence of their living. The former self-reliance and independence, the corporate discipline also vanishes. In India there is a tendency towards the categorisation of tribes into castes, and these castes are usually at the bottom of the social scale. In areas where free commercial penetration has been permitted, there has been much commercial exploitation as depicted in Narayan's *Kocharethi* and Mohanty's *Paraja*. It would seem therefore that the break-up of tribal society inevitably leads to a loss of the tribal values/virtues and a rapid assimilation of the vices of civilization.

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