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Literary Representation of Bondo Culture and Women in Pratibha Ray's Select Stories

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Abstract:

“I am a humanist. Men and women have been created differently for the healthy functioning of society. The specialities women have been endowed with should be nurtured further. As a human being however, women is equal to man” (Indian communicator, April 1996).

Pratibha Ray is a versatile, eminent contemporary female writer of Orissa. She is the first woman to receive Moortidevi award in 1991 for her miraculous and prodigious deconstructive mythic novel “Yajnaseni”. She is famous for stylistic creativity cannons and thematic concerns and asserts a dramatic poetic and epistolary narratology in her fictions. Her novels and short stories are based on love of nature, love of culture and rites, love of universal distinct race with its eco-humanitarian ideologies and deals with social situations in connection with human attributes. She focusses more on deconstructing the pre-mythic narratives, juxtaposition of tradition and customs with modernity, internal psyche and feminism. She is fascinated towards the lives of Bondo culture and most of her collection such as “Adibhoomi”, “Beeja Mantra” “Bhagabanara Desh”(Land Of God) are based on the life cycle of Bondo clans.

The research helps us to study the reversal system of patriarchal society and demarcating role of mainstream division of labour. It helps us to study about the voice and struggles of women in the stories and focus on the concept of motherhood and self-sacrifice through Ray's hart stories in “Flesh”, “Mother” and “Sanki”. The whole research focuses on the select short stories of Pratibha Ray, which reflects on the status of women in the Bondo tribes of Orissa and depicts about the love and affection towards their family and humanity, their values and their integrity towards their culture, their strength, economic control, independence, power and their inner strength or eternal feminine and female dominance. In a way Pratibha Ray signifies the lifestyle and customs of the endangered, primitive and indigenous of Bondo clan. This research can be seen as an inspiration to the mainstream feminism because the principles and goals of the feminism are deeply rooted and ingrained in the culture and practices of the clan which they have inherit from their time of evolution. In a way, the eminent Odiya writer Pratibha Ray attempts voice to the voiceless community which are confined in the hill Ranges of Malkangiri.

Keywords: Bondo, feminism, motherhood, patriarchy, autonomy, tribal, culture, inner strength, matrilineal, indigenous, mainstream, barbaric.

The Bonda tribes, who are known as “Bondo Poraja” and are only found on the isolated hill ranges of Khairput district of Malkangiri district of Odisha. They belong to Proto-Australoid racial group. Bondos call themselves “Remo” meaning human and speaks Austroasiatic language (Elwin,1950:1). They are known as “ Remo-Sam” which means human language.

They are unique and peculiar for their semi-naked dress and shaven head of women folks, homicidal offences, aggressive, wild and independent spirit. The women folks are semi-nude and cover their upper parts with the beads of necklace and lower genital parts with the piece of cloth known as "Ringa". They are hostile to the modernity and civilized world and speaks Austro-Asiatic language and are considered as savage. They are unique for their unfamiliar tongue, excessive over consumption of the liquor and for their aggressive and wild behaviour of male folks.. They have both terraced and shifting cultivation and entirely dependent upon agriculture. They are fond of carcass, beef and liquor. Pathkhanda Mahaprabhu is their deity who is worshipped in the form of sword and celebrate all the festivals. They believe in demigods, spirits and necromancy. They used to worship the sun and moon as their demigods . The entire village is controlled by the Naik. Naik is the head of the community and called as "Bada Naik" and he solves the issues of bride price, homicidal offences, property, land, divorce and other related issues. But due to modernization, their culture leads to controversies and problems in terms of legal matters, adulthood, political organization where women are not involved. Due to the development of Bondo development agency, there may be improvement in the facilities provided to them but because their cultural practices are very different from others or main stream society, they are considered as barbaric and uncivilized. It also leads to controversies in public life as well as in the community itself. Its important to note that this tribe highly respect the decision of their female folks and considered them as ultimate decision maker. The community crosses the demarcating lines of the mainstream division of labour or which can be seen as the reversal of family roles, where females indulged themselves in the physical manual work as well as indoor activities whereas the male folks used to spare their time by intoxicating Sago palm juice and indulging themselves in homicidal offences as they are in efficient and inferior from their female folks. Female has entire control over the institution of marriage where the matrimony links with the matrilineal society. The youth dormitories, commonly known as Selani and Ingersin Dingo for both boys and girls act as matrimonial agency, where they can choose their own life partner. And the Bonda girls have the entire rights to accept or reject the proposal of the boy. Another interesting fact about the Bondas clans is the marriage of the middle aged women with the early teenage of man of 8 years nearly an age gap of 18-20 years, they have the power to compensate bride price and can leave the boy at any time. The entire family depends upon the economic of women folks, where the male becomes the care taker of the infants and the women has the entire power to control over their economic stability. During initial stage, the women becomes the dominating agent in the family and she is supposed to choose her life partner on the basis of his physical strength and masculinity, so that he can support her wife during the old age. They have entire freedom of sexual experiences and mainly practised "capture marriage", and they support love marriages. They are strict with their religions and don't have any specific restrictions for women as the patriarchal society have. The females are proud of their dress as it shows the individuality of their tribes. The upper part of their body is bare and covered with beads of necklace and the lower genital part with the piece of cloth and have shaven head as they have been cursed by Sita, but they are proud of their attire and not at all ashamed. In a way it is reversal way of patriarchal society where the men subjugate women in terms of marriage, dowry and higher status. Their voice is being

dominated by the male power where they cannot raise their voice towards the adulterous relationship of his husband whereas in Bonda tribe the girl has the power to divorce.

The three short stories “Sanki”, “Flesh” and “Mother” represents the position of women in the tribal world. It not only depicts about the strength and power of female folks rather also shows about the sufferings, trauma and agony during their later phase of old age, where they are helpless because they had tragic circumstances. Bonda women main concern in her support in her old age, but here their husband was convicted and the female protagonist suffer from mental trauma and agony. Ray has not only pointed out the physical strength rather reflects on the mental psychic strength of a Bonda women in terms of self-sacrifice. Ray placed the female protagonist of each story as the economic supporter, guide and shows her as a dominating agent in terms of their marriage and economic support-bread maker. The select short stories depict the life and struggles of three tribal women of Bondo community. Pratibha Ray has clearly focused on their innocence, their integrity, their values and love towards their family, humanity and culture. Ray points out the inner strength of her female characters. She reflects on the physic of a female, whether it gives rise to the optimistic quality of female power and strength or the pessimistic qualities of her sufferings in a feministic way. She calls this as “the eternal feminine or inner strength”. She connects the lives of tribal character such as Sanki, Budei and Lachhamma and the mother with the optimistic qualities of mythical women such as Sita, Kunti, Amba and Savitri (2014,p.8). T. Sharma points out “Aryan woman was perfect equality with her husband, subject to show the strength of womanhood. She had complete control of the household and was the prime intellectual influence on the children” (1987,p.7).

According to the patriarchal stereotypical notion women are being subjugated and they are given a secondary position which can be pronounced as “women, rooted in their families, remain graceful subordinates of men”. Ray emphasises on both levels of feminine qualities in terms of docile, gentle and nurturing as well as focuses on women’s own initiatives and decision making power through the women character of Bondo tribes. Ray is highly fascinated by the values and cultures of Bondo and called them not innocent rather ignorant of outside world and are alien to outside ways and issues. She highlights the autonomy, power and dominance of the Bondo women in their tribal world, which rather is the common motto or concern of the contemporary feminists and also reflects about their problems and controversies by the other anthropologists.

This collection of short stories by Prathibha Ray brings out the many hues of the feminine in the backdrop of tribal world. She focuses on the integrity and values inherent in their tribal community and their women. She opines that “these women of earth may not be literate, liberated and empowered in the modern sense. But theirs is liberation of heart, hands, breasts, womb, love and soul; they have a discipline and code of conduct drawn by themselves, through their experience of life”.(2014,p.13)

Pratibha Ray has clearly expressed about the concept of motherhood in the short story of “mother”. It focuses on the unconditional love of Soma Kirsani’s mother towards him. S. N. Ratha points: “Bondo women are always in the productive way in respect of human child and human food. They deem it to be proud privilege to become mother and if she produces more

child she is highly respected in society”(p.189). In the short story “mother”, Soma kirsani mother is attached towards him and shows the pain, grief and trauma of Soma's mother, when he was convicted and sent to jail. It shows the love, attachment of a bondo women towards her son. Some of the lines from the story of “mother” proves the concept of motherhood when Soma's mother says:

“don't you worry, Soma. Don't feel sad. Eat lentil
and rice regularly. I'll keep your Mahua liquor safe.
I'll care for your wife and children. If your wife wants
to go to another man, she can go; I'll be here. Though I
might not live to see you return, the sword of Mahaprabhu
will always be there. So will the sun God and the Mother
Goddess. When I die, my spirit will live in the pole that holds
up your hut in the middle. I'll save your children from misfortune.
My Duma, my spirit, will wait for your Return. Everything that
you have will remain the way it is. Don't worry”(114).

The lacerated, blood stained cheeks which she scratched on her face shows her deep love and grief towards her son. Mahua is a liquor which symbolises milk or nourishing agent. His mother gave promise to preserve the liquor because Bondo people respects the mahua tree and adhered towards the honour-bond Promise. The promise of being always there as a shadow and protecting his duma shows her concern for her son. Bondo women are concerned towards their child while boys are addicted in liquor and homicidal offences. Soma's statement in the story reflects about the attachment, which he says :

“ the sky might be false. But the mother can never be unreal.

The father can be real from outside, like the sky, but the

mother is as real as the earth-she can never be untrue.

Like the earth that constantly remains under your feet,
no matter where you walk, the mother too stays close
by you like a shadow. Even when she dies, her presence
hovers around you- when you go to hunt, or to gather
the mahua flowers or when you go to jail” (p.116).

This line from the story “Mother” shows the unconditional love of Soma's mother.

Ray has reflected the power of Bondo women through their female dominance in their unit of marriage and socio-economic system through the stories “Sanki” and “Mother”. Bondo

women are being given absolute freedom and liberty in order to dominate the male folks in the nexus unit of marriage and dormitories. Ray points out “women have the power to dictate, at the same time she is vulnerable. That is the irony of femininity.”(2014,p.11). But Ray has shown the female dominance power of Bondo women in her stories which is again the reversed of patriarchal system. She is trying to show the independent, liberated customs of Bondo tribes towards women, where the man respect and value the women. In the story “Sanki”, the concept of power is revealed when Sanki says “ tell me first, do you eat out of a leaf plate or a metal cup?”, which means whether the boy is rich or poor or “ do you a servant on other house or enjoy your own food in your house”, which shows Sanki judgemental and women higher status in dormitory. When Buda proposed her she tested his masculinity by bringing a piece of burning cinder and putting it on his chest in order to know his physical tolerance and masculinity. Buda confession of eating in metal brass and achieving success in physical manual work leads to the Sanki approval of marriage. A Bondo female approves a male by means of his economic and physical labour or else the boy will be rejected by the girl which shows the power of the females in the intuition of marriage. The female protagonist of the story “Mother” also reflects the concept of power and her voice of dominance towards his husband, which lead into the control power. She pounces on her husband like an angry lioness and abuses at him and say “go back to that woman you have come from”, which shows the rising voice of Bondo women towards their husband. They have the power to control over their bed temper and can punished them for their mischievous, notorious and offences. Another incident depicts about the voice against the male folks, when she grabs Soma hands from the dance circle and says “are you going to dance all night long? Are you going to wait till you are an old man before you start worrying about the house? you are a man now, not a child anymore.”(p.107). Lachhma’s was aware about the temptation towards his sister-in-law and therefore she has the entire liberty to raise her voice against her husband, which shows the power given to Bondo girl and shows their higher position which is again a reversal system in patriarchal society, where the wife has no right or her voice is being suppressed by the male dominance in the case of extra marital relationship.

The women in Pratibha Ray’s stories are tenacious. They are constantly preoccupied in helping and providing for others, whether it is their husband, children, acquaintances and humanity. But whereas men used to love their wives but they used to love more something else. In the case of Bondo man, they used to love their wives but not more than their homicidal offences and addiction towards consumption of liquor. But a women’s love for her men makes him the centre of her life. Pratibha ray makes the inner strength of women a focal point in her stories of “Mother”, “Sanki”, “Flesh” and relate it with the human psychic. She extended the inner strength and link with self-sacrifice. Sanki wastes away her youth waiting for her husband turning down the marriage proposal by another man like Sita waited for Rama in Ashokavana. Budei gives her life to save her husband from killing an innocent man. Sanki was entangled by Buda’s promise to preserve his Salap till he returns. The statement of Sanki’s proves her attribute, when she says to Hadi “I have preserved Buda’s liquor. How will I go with you without giving it to him? Once he returns he will shoot arrows at both of us. If you can wait I will hand over the liquor and come with you. Don’t be angry, don’t kill my mother. Is it ok?”(87). This statement shows about the unbreakable promise of honour-

bound. Promise leads to pain and trauma during her old age. It's her self-sacrifice that she sacrifices her beauty, temperaments, desires and her entire youth because of the promise and keeps on waiting for her husband. Budhei's self-sacrifice links to the sacrifice of her own life in order to save his husband from being killed or from killing an innocent one.

According to Pratibha Ray, it takes a lot of effort and tolerance for an individual to sacrifice their own interests, beauty for others in order to make a harmony between community and family but her characters reflect those attitudes. Radha Chakravarti posits "motherhood is defied, but paradoxically, the myth of mother's quasi-divine status is premised upon her capacity for voluntary self-sacrifice". (2004, p.8). The self-sacrifice of mother is clearly seen in the story of "mother", where Soma's mother has the capacity to resist the tendency of self-sacrifice by scratching the face, and relate with the control of male offences.

All the female protagonists of the stories are economically independent starting from Sanki, Lachmma to Budei. Bondo women are economic assets of their family. They indulge themselves to the outside activity to household chores. All of the female characters are the controller, guide of their husband who are inefficient and inferior from them. The statement in "Flesh", where the writer says "they lost Budei's working hand. From where would a bondo man bring money? He would have to mortgage his assets and give up his child as bonded labourers" (p.59), shows that Budei as the financial backbone of their entire family, which is associated with the matrilineal society of Bondo.

Pratibha Ray also reflects about the body, flesh and its dimensions which is clearly seen in the story of "Flesh". Sandhu says:

"human body is so terrible! But there is so much suspicion and so much sin evoked by it. People kill each other for the sake of this body. Life is an unseen thread of thin air. That thin air makes the body as much beautiful as it evokes greed, lust, lies, hatred, mystery and suspicion. Once life goes out of the body, the body becomes ugly. Life disappears in the space and there is no news of it" (p.63).

This line from "Flesh" shows the Sandhu sense of disgust toward the human life when he saw the horrendous face and fluid rotten brain as well as the effusion smell of flesh and finally imagined the meat flesh with Budhei human flesh. This shows the suspicion, beauty belongs during your life. People seek for gratification for the sexual pleasures but at last it all ends with the rotten flesh just like the Budei.

At last, Pratibha Ray signifies the integrities and values of tribal women by representing the female characters in story who used to strictly adhere their dress code and customs. They feel proud of their culture and attire. All the female characters in the stories wear their traditional attire which depicts their individuality. They never feel ashamed of their attire. It is again the reversed of patriarchal system, where the women are expected to clad their entire

body. Bondos women never deviate from the honour-bound promise which shows their attachment to their clans and can be seen in the stories. In a whole she depicts about the dominance power, love, affection, their individualistic attributes through Sanki, Lachmma and Budei who at last suffers from mental trauma, agony, helplessness. As a whole the concerns and goals or agendas of mainstream feminism, who used to fights for the right of gender equality and patriarchal oppression, dowry, economic independence and autonomy are completely alien to the tribal world because they are completely ignorant of the outside cosmopolitan world and its issues. But these practices are indigenous and inherited on their culture from their evolution, who are feminists in their own way, because it is completely the reversal way of patriarchal and mainstream issues of female foeticide, dowry and the current issues of sartorial freedom. Although the feminists fight for empowerment, liberty, autonomy and gender equality and reproductive justice, but they never concentrate on the tribal or the marginalised communities. They never focuses on their practices and relate it with their goals. Although the feminists tells about the complete whole women problems, but they are separating these tribal and marginalised women and their concerns, which in a way don't fulfil the concept of feminism and rather make it incomplete in its theory. The conclusion part concerns on the Pratibha Ray notions about giving voice to voiceless. According to her women should nurture in their positions and should equally treated and for which the Bonda tribes is the perfect example of the women autonomy and independence. But the feminists narrowed down it to elites classes and are not concentrating on the tribal women. So in a way through her stories she is giving a message to the mainstream to idealize the practice of Bonda tribes and their women so that it will be an inspiration for the mainstream. They should look after the tribe and follow because they are feminists from their evolution because of their culture and practices.

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