



Displacement, Identity and Existence: An Ecofeminist Study of the Socio-ethnic Conflicts in *The Primal Land*

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Abstract

This paper is an ecofeminist exploration of Pratibha Ray's (2001) one of the most imperative works *The Primal Land*, translated from Oriya text into English. The article presents grave issues on the themes of the exploitation of women within the community as well as the exploitation of the indigenous people at large, where nature becomes a spiritual and cultural symbol. The physical forces lurk upon tribal communities for the encroachment of land and the exploitation of natural reservoirs of resources and fracture the bond between nature and culture. Unrestrained hunger for modernization and urbanization leads to dissolving age-old bonds with nature and culture. Representation of internal and external conflicts where women are seen to work with a lot of burdens and face typical stringent traditional practices whereas external conflicts to preserve cultural identity and existence of ethnic community against the exploitative local government takes shape in this paper. Exploration of the life of the Bonda Tribe in the midst of the natural environment, their unique traditional practices, and their close affinity with nature as a spiritual being is presented through the ecofeminist holistic notion. This paper excavates the socio-ethnic tensions between the ethnic community and the politics of Development on one hand and the internal conflicts based on gender bias on the other.

Keywords: Tribal Identity, Indigenous People, Ethnicity, Cultural Distortion, Gender Discrimination, Political Development, Anthropology, Ecofeminism.

Introduction

The Primal Land is a novel that showcases the plight of tribals of the Bonda tribe that dwells in the forests and foothills of Koraput, Orissa. This text reasserts the significance of nature in the life of mankind. Not only nature is an integral part of the bionetwork but humankind itself is a sub-part of the representation of nature. Tribes are generally considered communal groups with their own dialect, land, culture, belief, and value systems. They are considered outcasts of society perceiving they are backward, uncivilized, illiterate, and peculiar. India is a country that has a variety of cultures and traditions of tribes and indigenous folks are by their way of living a secluded life in forests having their own customs and laws as explained in the book, *Tribal and Indigenous People of India: Problems and Prospects* "social, cultural and economic conditions distinguish them from other sections of the national society, and whose status is regulated wholly or partially by their own customs or traditions or by special laws or regulations" (Pati, 2002, p. 21). They are considered to be economically weak and

hence are exploited by the local government. The land is not just a mere resource for them to be misused but it is the most integral part of their life as it represents their cultural identity and the source of their survival. In India, indigenous folks have been secluded in the name of modernization and development that not only problematizes their daily chores but also snatches away their abode.

Modernization and development have become tools in the abusive hands of greedy political powers that take away not only their land but also displace them from their age-old cultural identity and culture. The bonds between them and nature are fractured in the name of development. The patriarchal society has not only created inequality in the sphere of gender but also these hegemonic forces have created severe differentiation between normal society and the marginalized parts of it. It is because of this reason, the long-established social position that is their collective cultural identity is jeopardized by the change in their socio-ethnic roles and physical landscape displacement. Women of the Bonda tribe have the most intricate connections with the natural environment due to the daily chores that are performed by them to take care of their families and husband. The position of women in *The Primal Land* is the most vulnerable. In the tribal society of Bonda women are chosen based on their strength and good health so as to make them the caretakers of half the age of their child grooms.

The onset of the tribal narratives began in the early nineteenth century. As enumerated by Sengupta the tribal culture, its folklores, traditional customs, legends, and literature established in publications of literary journals such as *Man of India* (1921) and the establishment of Anthropological Survey of India (1954) gave a chance for a systematic literary background for the study of tribal communities, their life, and culture. After the Independence of India, more and more dwellings on tribal study originated in the form of novel writing and also translated into all major languages from different cultures that presented the rich life and ethnographic culture of indigenous people. Ray began her writing career after she got inspired by her father in her early childhood. Her first novel *The Rain Spring Summer* (1974) acclaimed her massive popularity, and her career spiked fame which was originally named as *Barsa Basanta Baisakha*. Her ethnographic novel *The Primal Land* originally published in 1993 was based on her subjective familiarity relating to the indigenous Bonda tribe in Odisha. She had also done her post-doctoral research on criminology of Bonda Highlander and Tribalism in the 1970s before putting her efforts towards novel writing. Her novel showcases the bizarre ethics and cultural beliefs existent in the community of the Bonda Tribe situated in the isolated mountains of southwest Odisha.

Ecofeminism in India

The most prominent figure in igniting the flames of ecofeminism in India is Vandana Shiva. Her point in focus is majorly the social ecofeminist framework but most of her works are considered as the output of Radical ecofeminist mode. Vandana Shiva (1988) criticizes the western intrusion on the traditional Indian modes of agriculture and modes of spending life. She subjects the subjugation of women and nature on the basis of gender roles and cultural pollution as the result of patriarchal, western development models as well as colonial practices. She insists on the need to adapt to the inherent traditional practices to create a sustainable mode of living. She also despises the modern science and technological methods of controlling women biologically and hampering the quality of farming through modern techniques polluting the environment. She asserts this kind of modernization and development leads to drift against the age-old traditional practices that believe nature (Prakruti) to be a living creative process (feminine standard) through which spiritual solace and sustenance can be attained. It is nature or Prakriti through which all life forms shoot (Shiva, 2014). Nature is considered a mere resource with the advent of western conceptions

in India to be exploited just as women are. Women's indigenous knowledge and their dependence on nature for a living are undervalued and hampered by modern methodologies. In special reference to the Third World Women Shiva brings out that women are not only the sufferers but they also possess a rebellious spirit against the destructive forces of patriarchy by exhibiting their indomitable inner strength to save the Himalayan Trees in Chipko Movement in the 1970s. All those women struggled to save the Prakruti, their life source. Against the disjointing and dissecting of hegemonic forces, the efforts of women highlight the special affinity and connection between nature, women, and the marginalized who seek their vigor in connectedness, unity in diversity, and spirituality (Shiva, 1988).

The mindset of ecofeminist thinkers believes that the reason for the dual suppression of women and nature is the value systems prevailing in society and the gender constructs based on hierarchical structures and dualism values (Warren, 1997). Ecofeminism in India unfolds another kind of feminism that is not just based on gender but also based on cultural values and beliefs. A twin kind of domination remains in the lives of Third world Women through the disseminating power structures of colonialism and socio-cultural practices prevailing in Indian civilization such as caste, class, gender discrimination, and devastation of nature. Women are preconditioned from birth to act and behave in the socially constructed gender roles of caring, reproducing, and nurturing, only by living according to the needs of patriarchal culture do they receive value and recognition. In this kind of contextual framework women and nature both lose their inner original quality to fulfill the needs of others they lose their individuality and agency.

Developmental Politics and Indigenous People

The Primal Land accounts for the history of the Bonda tribe from the colonial period to modern times. An authentic life image of the Bonda Tribe and their mistreatment both on the corporal and emotional level has been depicted in the text. The political authorities and their so-called developmental projects hampered and victimized the innocent Bondas through their twisted motives and insensitive greedy attitude. "The stimulation to move on and progress was provided by the development project, and the uprooting and destruction it involved were sanitized under the neo-Cartesian category of 'displacement'" (Shiva, 1988, p. 103), according to Shiva these destructive developmental projects have made the Bondas helpless, their culture, their ancestral lands, their affinity and survival on nature all these things have disrupted and they are forced to merge with an urban monoculture. Urban spaces are alien for indigenous people and they are always in a constant search for their roots and cultural identity. Ray recreates the most important past events of Bonda's life and presents their illiterate, poverty-stricken, and unrestrained life under the shadow of nature. The lives of Bondas are solely dependent on forests, hence nature is not only an important part of their life but most crucial for their survival and existence.

In India, forests have always come in the way of development. Hence, forests are considered antithetical to modernization. Forest is seen merely as a resource that is exploited according to the demands of the industries and trees are cut for developmental projects like dam constructions, road construction, mining projects, etc. to civilize the people living in it. Contradictory to the civilized lives of people living in urban areas and cities while tribal and ethnic communities have always invested their lives in the forests, their cultural practices and traditions are obsolete to development outlook. The struggle of tribes and especially women in the effort to save forests have shaped the foundation of many heart-touching narratives written by well-known Indian authors such as Pratibha Ray among others. This paper raises a question about the Rights of Human beings, the repercussions of modernization, and the urgent necessity to preserve biodiversity in the form of forests.

Power structures dilute the unique culture of Bondas by assimilating them with the inner-city of Odisha. The Bonda Development Agency (BDA) was set up in 1977, paved the way for the outside world to influence the pure Bonda traditional values and forced them to preach to a new God, use a new language and forget their indigenous knowledge, despite the fact that tribal people lead a life with their own unique cultural value systems and beliefs in the matter of nuptial. *The Primal Land*, is an anthropological narrative that defines an interwoven tribal group that is situated on the highlands of Koraput with natural ambiance. The novel depicts a beautiful representation of fictitious storyline and personalities that represents the intimate connection and traditional schemes. Ray demonstrates a social commitment to the indigenous people, and their socio-cultural and commercial conditions. She also incorporates the rural communities such as farmers and the culture of her state.

The text presents two layered themes of the internal and external world such as the external forces exploiting the tribal community and their struggle for survival on one hand and on the other it also works with intimate conflicts of the bonded labour through the landowners and financial crisis experienced throughout their lives. The abuse of indigenous communities by government officials hampered the long-standing position of the tribe. The double suppressions of the internal, as well as external forces, destabilize the tribes between identity and survival. Moreover, in the name of urbanization and modernization, the government interferes in the tribal communities which results in the oppression of culture and tradition and the chutnification of it, and social and ethnic conflicts additionally make their locus complex and leads the tribal group suffers both the loss of their lands and cultural roots. Therefore, the paper targets to focus on interpersonal veracity in connection with the critical situation of the Bondas, whose concern is whether to survive or to merge in the ways of the modern world. For this reason, the focus of this study is on the adverse impact on the lives of the Bonda tribe, their inherent traditional ways of living, and the destructive encroaching external politics of development. This paper eventually examines the gradual effects of development that endanger the existence and identity of the Bonda tribe.

The literary texts based on tribal study portray the diversified culture present in India and outside, which especially emphasises the cultural tribes that are on the verge of extinction or are endangered. The socio-cultural context of the indigenous communities exhibits a new array of living solely dependent on their survival in nature. As reported by Savyasachi (2001) a village elderly said:

I was born as a part of the bhum. I will die Homeless in the 'Global Village' when this bhum dies . . . I was born with all others in this bhum; I go with them. He who has created us all will give us food. If there is so much variety and abundance in bhum, there is not reason for me to worry about food and continuity. (Mies, 2014, p. 103)

The Bondas led a self-sufficient life by doing everything by themselves such as growing their own crops for self-consumption is an example of how indigenous knowledge of vegetation and farming is optimal for the environment and is a more sustainable way of living. The wildlife of the forest and rough agricultural lands protected them from being polluted and exploited from the outside world. But due to the Bonda Development Authority (BDA), the Bondas lost their tradition of prudence and their identity. Development creates a world of broken relationships with their lands, culture and traditions by ancestors. Captivatingly, the folklore of the Bonda tradition has a lot of variety of myths on the origin of Bondas that differs from person to person. The cultural tradition of the Bonda tribe is mystic and unique from the perspective of balding the head of women to the vindictive swear word of Gurangpoi. The existence of Bondas has always been isolated from the outside world, their

community is kept hidden inside the lap of forests untouched by the polluted hands of civilized society. They always followed their self-made tradition and laws which they followed from generation to generation till they were forced to be introduced to the outside modern world changing their lifestyle, culture, religion, habits, attitudes, and everything. The government officials invaded their territory and this interaction with the outside world deteriorated their innocent life, traditional values, affinity towards nature and their age old culture. As Aruna Gnanadason (2003) recalls in *Ecofeminism and Globalization* “The mode of resource utilization evolved by Indian society... We, therefore, expect the evolution of a number of cultural practices resulting in a sustainable way of natural resources by the caste groups that constitute not only the genetic but also the cultural units of the Indian society” (p. 82). Tribes and nomads have a unique way of utilizing natural resources as per the production of the resources in a particular geographical area. They invest natural resources in an optimal way that does not hinder the natural balance of nature and ecology.

Ultimately, the narrative structure of *The Primal Land* inhibits attributes of the Bonda tribe as a self-sufficient, naïve, wild, and as ferocious tribal group that is unaltered by the ways, attitude, and beliefs of civilization influenced by the West. Ray amplified an image of tribal and indigenous communities that is larger than life with vivid imagery of culture and complexities, picturesque landscapes, and geographical structure. The text is full of thematic schemes relating to their marriage, socio-cultural belief, myths and their gender-biased law. All these internal and external conflicts threaten their existence and identity which is the main focus of this paper.

Ecofeminist Concerns: Nature, Gender and Ethnicity

Pratibha Ray is one of the most accomplished female writers of Orissa, she has won many literary awards through her heart-trending fictional works on contemporary issues. Her remarkable collection of works includes seventeen short stories, eight novels, one short story, and many children’s books. The collection of novels that acclaimed her prestigious awards is *Shilapadma* (Stone Lotus) written in 1985 for which she received Sarla and Sahitya Akademi awards, another very important novel penned by her *Yagnaseni* (Draupadi) acclaimed her Moorti Devi Award in the year 1991. She had also been an important associate of the Public Service Commission of Orissa. Ray engaged her works with the reality-based landscapes and historical implications of the society in Orissa. Her literary works dwell into the fictional landscapes and socio-cultural background of her state, although the inspiration is purely non-fictional. Her works present the existing real-time heritage of Orissa’s tradition and culture.

The novel *Adibhumi* by Pratibha Ray was published after an English translation as *The Primal Land* in the year 2001. The novel portrays the drastic circumstances faced by Bondas in their socio-cultural history. Intricate details about their customs, everyday regime, behavior, and rituals are examined through the textual mode of narration by Ray. The novel exhibits a deep sense of vividness and imagery of landscapes and the mountainous region of Koraput Orissa that is secretly veiled with a lush green blanket of nature inside which the Bonda tribe resides in the Malkangiri region. The novel is a depiction of a rigorously investigated fictional representation of the ethnographic community. This novel was originally published in 1993 and later it stood against a lot of protests from the tribal communities due to its bold representation of sexual connections between father and daughter-in-law in their community.

Forest is the pursuit of life for Bondas and all the ethnic groups at large. These indigenous people not only survive through nature but also are attached deeply to each and everything present in it, the forest is the abode for tribal folk. From birth till their death they

have been living under the shelter of forests and their cultural practices established a deep bond between the two. Mountains, rivers, trees, land, and animals all these components of nature are spiritual and physical solace for the Bondas. Ray (2001) very beautifully presents this affinity between nature and the tribal in *The Primal Land*:

No lack of virgin forest; the land was free to everyone The mountains teemed with salap trees, birds and beasts, worms and insects: no Bonda went hungry ... now the naked jungle bared its teeth at the Bonda to taunt him: "You have been cutting down my trees; now you must pay the price. The birds and beasts, the fruits and roots, the rain and the wind will all disappear, and you will burn in the scorching sun."
(p. 65)

And, "The Bonda owns everything here-the clouds, the sky, the mountains, forests, waterfalls, terraced fields, trees, and animals. Hemmed in and guarded by life and death."
(Ray, 2001, p. 2)

The kind of connection that is present in all indigenous communities of India is spiritual. The Bondas worship nature and believe God resides in all natural forms such as trees, rivers, stones, animals, and even spirits. Their God does not need any image or shape, nature itself is the form of God and it breathes for them. "The gods and goddesses whom the Bonda worship do not need stone images carved by man: they manifest themselves to him in different forms, as they please-a rock, a tree, a lake, a tiger, a ghost." (Ray, 2001, p.19)

The bond between them and nature is such that they merge with nature in oneness as if they are not separate identities but a part of the forest only just as the trees, river, mountains, birds ,etc. All its life forms are not distinct individuals but are components of one larger picture. But due to the interference of the external modern world and as a result of these development schemes, many people of the Bonda community consciously or unconsciously have started to get themselves away from the forest and its economy. The interpretation of *The Primal Land* by Ray is ecological and feministic in connection to the socio-cultural life of the Bondas. This paper assesses the ecofeminist conceptions in the narrative structure through the women characters and the ecological landscapes in the novel.

The text not only presents the victimization of indigenous people and exploitation of nature by the political power structures but also identifies the internal struggle of women in their everyday life that runs analogous to the abusive exploitation of forests and the ethnic community as a whole. Ray utilizes an analytical purview of nature's commodification of both the patriarchal culture as well as the external politics of the development of western conceptions. Women face twin oppressions from both the inside and the outside world. They are always busy working on the fields for daily chores and are married to a groom half of their age. The marriage system of Bondas is very peculiar as presented in the text, only those women are chosen for marriage who are healthy and fit so as to take care of the groom and the family and also to share the burden equally in the fields, while the introduction of the outside world in the interior parts of the forest brings even worse forms of exploitation by the patriarchal power forces.

The usual marriage system of the society exhibits women being taken care of by their husbands but in Bonda tribe this practice is averted just as in the case of Budei Toki who waits for fourteen long years for her husband to return from jail, retaining her chastity. On other hand her husband Bhaga Bindu who is filled with pride for returning to his home from jail demands longsi (divorce) for as Budei becomes old and distorted. She suffers this trauma throughout her life and all sacrifice for family and pain has gone in vain just as forests of

Koraput always nurtured the Bondas and mankind in one way or another but now are taken down for the sake of development. On top of it Bhaga Bindu brings home another wife that is very common in Bondas and he even surpasses all the limits by gawking at her pregnant daughter-in-law. All of this made Budei hopeless and broken. In utter pain, she grieves that just because she is a woman she has no rights as a human, on contrary the laws of Bonda culture do not give any rights to women and finally, she gives up and leaves her age-old house and husband towards an unsafe and blurred future.

Ironically the father and other male members created chaos but did not take her to their home; they even slaughtered Bhaga Bindu's animals and slapped-up-meal over it. This presents a clear image of what is the condition of women and animals in a patriarchal society. Ray depicts the ugly face of the heartless patriarchal world where once a woman is withered and loses her youth and charm is accepted nowhere, she is not accepted by her husband and not even in her paternal home. The young age and hard work of Bonduni's are the objectives of male Bondas to take advantage of. This is a kind of forever imposed culture on Bonduni's existence. This way women in indigenous communities suffer a twin kind of oppression as neither are they given any rights in the community nor could they claim any rights from the outside world for they do not even come under the widowed category to be compensated in any way by the government. Finally, the marriage system of Bondas is to keep women in the confined chains of culture.

Women are not allowed to wear sarees or to grow long hair to edifice their natural beauty due to the cultural myths. The myth carried generation after generation forbids women from wearing full clothes in the Bonda tribe "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, 2001, p. 25) The Bonda's fear of the myth of Goddess Sita Takrani's curse which can bring an end to the Bonda community makes them reject a Bonduni's wish for wearing rinda (a beads necklace). Men in the Bonda community take all the decisions single-handedly without taking women into consideration in any serious matter. While women are burdened with the responsibilities of working in the fields and taking care of their children and husbands, men are comparatively idle and become intoxicated with the sapung juice. Sapung juice is also symbolic of the poverty and hunger of tribal communities. The social order of their community is unjust and gender-biased the same way the external political forces exploit and destroy nature. Both women and nature become voiceless in the patriarchal world and become voiceless. While women, nature as well as marginalized communities become the scapegoats of patriarchal destructive commodification and objectification.

The Primal Land emphasizes the themes such as sexual exploitation, the problem of bonded labor, women's struggle, displacement, and other socio-political issues endured by the women, indigenous people, and the voiceless nature. As Gnanadson (2003) curates "...shows how the Dalit and indigenous women, the lowest castes of the Indian caste system, bear the greatest impact of the destruction of creation and have the least access to resources..." (p. 73)

In the Bonda community, there is no upper and lower caste system. Ray, of her first-hand experience with the tribal people, presents the fray between the conventional Indian traditional ways of living versus the contemporary urban civilized culture that is influenced by Globalized western culture and presents the ecofeminist veins which run throughout the narrative.

The writer is aware of the plight of women in the society where they have suffered because of their secondary position within a dominant patriarchal system and the exploitation of forests and natural resources which aligns women, nature as well as the marginalized on the same grounds. The novels not only expose the poor conditions of women but also celebrate their strength to survive in the midst of everything.

Conclusion

India is a land of diversified cultures, traditions, languages, customs, beliefs, and economies within the vicinity of natural surroundings. The indigenous communities affected by the influence of the external world gradually lose their cultural identity leaving behind their ancestral land, myths, legends, and topographical surroundings. The plans issued by the government for the benefit of tribals resulted in the opposite tract that leaves the tribes in a dilemma of constant search for their identities and social groups. The major issues faced by tribal society is their loss of culture on one hand and on another that they are on the edge of extinction. Only 6,700 upper-class Bondas existed according to the Indian population census 2011 survey are the most isolated tribes in the world outside the forest. Women are most disadvantaged in contrast to the rest of the community members as they face double suppression from the internal as well as the external world.

The voiceless nature abused and exploited by the political powers runs parallel with the voicelessness of women in the community for the injustice based on biology and gender. The focal points of concern in the community are the marriage system, internal feuds, low birth rate, and gender issues. While the external factors that contribute to ruining culture and nature are the cutting of forests and loss of abode of tribes, dilution of culture, victimization of labor by the sahumkars and finally the ultimate ethical conflict of human life. The ethnicity of these indigenous communities is compromised for the sake of modernization. The ecofeminist conception calls for a holistic approach to preserving ecology, age-old cultures and eradicating all forms of oppression.

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