

The use of Literary Devices in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

Mousumi Patra

Assistant Professor

Shaheed Bhagat Singh Evening College

University of Delhi

mousumi.patra@sbse.du.ac.in

Abstract

The classic Odia novel *Paraja* is concerned with the representation of the Paraja tribe inhabiting the hinterlands of Odisha. The word 'Paraja' originates from the term 'Prajā' which means the 'subjects of a country'. The novel is not just a sociological document; its philosophical aspects acquire great significance and deserve academic scrutiny. Written in 1945, *Paraja*'s sociological concerns still remain contemporary. In the words of the translator who rendered it in English, the social is lifted to the level of the metaphysical in the hands of Gopinath Mohanty who is the author of this novel. *Paraja* might be labelled as an ethnographic document, but the novelist does not compromise on its literary aspects. The language, according to the translator, is colloquial at one point and lyrical, at the next; it becomes forthright at one moment and effervescent, at the next. Therefore, it becomes difficult to distinguish the borderline between prose and poetry in the novel. While the prose narrates the tragic tale of a tribal family, the lyrical style alleviates the serious mood of the novel. In the process, the narrator makes profuse use of symbols and images in the depiction of the social and cultural modes of the Paraja tribe. He mentions that words are inadequate symbols to express an experience. Considering the limitation of words, he finds images and symbols useful to convey human experiences and emotions in a much intense way.

Keywords: symbol, image, poetic style, literary device, narrative technique

Paraja is not just a fictional work but an authentic record of the hopes and sentiments, dreams and desires, pleasures and miseries of a tribe which really exists. The author Gopinath Mohanty, an eminent Sahitya Akademi Award Winner literary intellectual of Odisha, has left an extraordinary indelible imprint in the global fictional scenario with his huge and outstanding collection of fictional as well as non-

fictional outputs. Most of his writings are in Odia but the more notable ones have been translated into English to cover a vast range of audiences. *Paraja* is one such masterpiece that creates the contours of the fanciful world of the Paraja inhabited village, Sarsupadar with different shades, colours and dimensions using a language that is rich and lyrical. The landscape is imaginary but the tribe really exists in the backwoods of some districts in Odisha. Their main locations are Koraput, Pottangi, Semiliguda, Lamatpur, Laxmipur, Jeypore and Dashmantpur. Their mother tongue is Parji which is a part of the Dravidian language family.

As an administrative officer, the novelist was privileged to come in close proximity with the untouched tribal heartlands of the state. *Paraja* and a number of his other fictions that deal with the same tribal concept emerge out of his direct communication, first-hand experiences and the substantial knowledge of the tribal ethos. The novel bears the stamp of a magnificent onlooker who has studied the challenging circumstances, living conditions, cultural nitty-gritty of the Paraja tribe and has presented them with an exotic flavour and an antique appearance. The polychromatic sketches of fascinating scenery, graphic details of rugged mountains, dense forests and dirty villages, glimpses of superstitions and folklores, celebrations of festivities and seasonal merrymaking, tribal dialects and lyrical modes of communication, music and mass dances hold a special space in the novel that gives the picture of an ancient and enchanting cosmos. Sulochana Das (2015) has made an elaborate study of these aspects of the novel in her book *Odia Upanyasare Adibasi Jibanacharja* [The Depiction of Tribal Lifestyle in Odia Novels]. She has compared the portrayal of tribal way of living presented in *Paraja* with those depicted in some other texts and has identified similarities in the cultures of different ethnic communities.

Sitakant Mahapatra (1992) in his critical text *Reaching the Other Shore: The World of Gopinath Mohanty's Fiction*, has expressed that ethnographic details are an integral part of the 'epic design' of *Paraja*. However, *Paraja* cannot be confined to the identity of a mere documentation of ethnographic diversities or a synthesis of some ornamental, figurative notions. It narrates the sad tale of the protagonist Sukru Jani and his whole family who have to undergo a torrent of miseries due to the inhuman Shylock, Ram Bisoi. He is a typical money-lender wearing gold pendants and thick bangles that mock the dark lives of his bonded labourers. He is not concerned with anything else

other than exploiting people, hoarding wealth and other all other assets. The powerful government officers are his partners in crime. All the resourceful non-tribal people are on one side and the striving tribal people are on the other side. The people are too submissive to resist and they have to pour their blood, sweat and tears in the service of the lender. They treat the forest guard as a god and call him ‘great lord’ (Das, 1987). “He could easily be recognised as one from the civilized world, because in these hills where people went about half-naked, he was dressed in shirt and shorts”. His clothes signify his status as a civilized man. There is a contrast between the civilized forest guard and the half-naked Paraja. The guard is smart whereas the Paraja people are naïve and “their heads were like stones” that cannot articulate the reason behind their harassment (pp. 33, 42). Their prostrated position in front of the superior class signifies their servitude (Hall, 1997). In his insightful essay “Bikalpa Adhunikata: Sarala Mahabharata ra Ekalabya Upakhyān (Janapada o Jungle Madhyare Sangharsha ra Chitra: Ekalabya Upakhyān ru Paraja Parjyanta)”, Gaganendra Nath Dash has made an acute observation on this aspect, the conflict between forest dwellers and city people. In this unusual but convincing analysis, Dash (2022) has shown how since the early days of Odia literature, from Sarala Das’s fifteenth-century rendering of the *Mahabharata* to Gopinath Mohanty’s mid-twentieth century novel of epic proportions about the Paraja tribe, the marginalization, exploitation and displacement of the tribal population have served as tropes in Odia texts.

There is a sharp distinction between the status of the affluent usurper Ram Bisoi and his troupe and the hollow existence of the impecunious tribal (Das, 1987). The bullock-carts, horses, cattle, warehouses overflowing with crops, grain-bags etc. symbolize wealth and power. On the other hand, the ancestral land of the protagonist stands for the glory and heritage of the previous generations. It also signifies a sense of belongingness and attachment. The old, miserable handcuffed protagonist is struggling to safeguard this ancestral land and is chasing his dream of uniting his family. Sitakant Mahapatra (1992) has rightly stated that the novel has drawn the attention of readers by portraying the social problems and the role of fate in human life in a language that is essentially *figurative* by nature (p. 4). Similarly, Mayadhar Mansinha (1962), the well-known Odia poet and writer of *History of*

Oriya Literature, finds Gopinath Mohanty's language to be vital, evocative and metaphorical.

In the portrayal of the Paraja village, the novelist has not depicted a typical, idyllic rural area. He has given a realistic picture of a tribal village with all its imperfections. It does not create any nostalgia to visualise the lush countryside. The trashes and the stinking odour are ticked as the special features of this village:

The ground was littered with leaves, rolled into cups for drinking. Every home had in front of it a pile of mango kernels, thrown after the fruit had been eaten. Turmeric paste, which had been rubbed off human bodies, lay everywhere. Mandia found the piled-up rubbish and the stale odours in the wind deeply comforting; these were the sights and smells of home. (Das, 1987, pp. 167-168)

The novelist has not tried to cover up the filth spotted in the tribal society but he has tried to capture the attention of the readers to the diseases caused by the unhygienic living conditions. The imagery of 'odour' and 'litter' has been profusely used throughout the novel. The huts of the tribesmen have been demonstrated to be 'littered with dirt and rubbish' (p. 121). These images are constructed to be compared with the 'fragrance of money' and grandeur at the money-lender's empire (p. 119). And "in the darkness of the dingy shelter", the people are devastated both by the natural and man-made catastrophes (p. 37). The gloomy sights which predominate the novel make it very clear that darkness is part of the tribal community. The images of darkness give the impression of a world inhabited by a pitiable people under the subjugation of the powerful. It also confirms the existence of another world that is lighted and brightened by power and diplomacy. The collocation of the odour of rubbish in the huts of the Parajas and the smell of opulence in the lender's house affirms the disparity of two worlds completely different from each other: one is full of splendour and the other is utterly miserable (p.120).

The anthropomorphic metaphors in *Paraja* are prominent traits of the narration. Some inanimate objects have assumed human aspects to enhance the aesthetic appeal of the novel. The tired huts and bald thatches give the impression of an impoverished world. Even the inanimate objects are equally helpless as the living beings. The natural objects have been personified and animalized: 'Ferns grew as tall as a

full-grown man, waving their fronds like an elephant's trunks' (p. 161). Destiny has been personified as the main villain in the life of the people which controls their goals and aspirations. (Das, 1987).

The narrator has used the natural phenomena as symbols in different contexts. Critics justify it by citing the deep-rooted connection between tribal people and nature (Maharana, 1993). The star, the sun, the moon, the sky and clouds have been used as symbols to convey the happiness as well as predicaments of the characters. For instance, the 'sun looked more dead than alive' and the moon is getting pale. They have been used to communicate a gloomy setting (Das, 1987, pp. 157, 260). 'Darkness lay heavy and frozen under the big trees. Presently a bright star rose in a corner of the sky. It was the planet Venus, come out in the dark with a torch, to look for a tiny, lost soul' (p.157). The novel abounds with the images of several other natural objects to convey human emotions: 'Valleys, mountains and sky were buried beneath the sooty darkness and the air was heavy with feeling of desolation' (p. 261). These symbols indicate dejection and a sense of loss: 'When the clouds rumbled in the sky, lost memories returned and gnawed at the heart' (p. 226).

Some recurring symbols such as 'darkness', 'black', 'night', 'drab' etc. have been used more than one hundred and seventy times in the narration of the source text to imply both the inner as well as the outer darkness. These are potential symbols that signify the absence of light or happiness in the life of Paraja people: 'His hut was dark inside him lay a dark sorrow; but the night bore no resemblance to him. He was like a black cloud intruding into the moonlight' (p. 369). The word 'night' has been employed more than a hundred times and another closely connected word 'evening' has been put to use more than seventy-five times in the narration. The all-pervasive caliginous set-up is a pertinent layout of the novel. The protagonist's 'pitch dark' hut is a mute spectator of the afflictions which he has to go through. At the end, Sukru Jani and his sons find the 'darkness before sunrise' as a convenient time to negotiate with the lender as the darkness will save them from the possible embarrassment but they end up taking the life of the antagonist (p. 371).

One can identify a variety of images which stand for death and decay in the novel. These symbols also imply the passage of time and its

fleeting nature. They allude to the fragility of human life and the inevitability of death. The narrator's philosophical views on the realities of human existence which are related especially to the life of the protagonist are thus reflected: 'Wild spear-grass had sprouted on the land, grown up, withered and died; the leafless stumps of wild weeds stood in the fields; measuring the passage of hours and days with their shifting shadows ... The birds would fly away and the surviving crickets would set up a funeral chant to mourn their dead' (p. 214).

The novelist has made use of a great number of visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory images in the description of the food habits, living styles, celebrations and cultural practices and also in the depiction natural objects: 'The whole house stank of musty grain bags, manure and sweat from the Sahukar's cattle and servants' (p. 199). There are long descriptions which evoke a medley of different sense imageries: "Wild pigeons cooed softly in the groves and green pigeons perched in the jhodi trees, breakfasting on the berries" (p. 178).

A key feature of the narrative devices is the usage of animal, bird and reptile metaphors to signify the tribal affinity with beasts. The Paraja man roars like an animal; rouses to fury like an animal and can melt in the darkness like a 'fox' (Das, 1987, pp. 29, 31). There is a close association between the Paraja people and the animals when it comes to their movements: Jili sways like a 'serpent' and lies like a 'dead snake'; She and Bili flit from one tree to another like a pair of cranes (Das, 1987, pp. 203, 156).

In *Paraja*, the novelist has attempted to highlight the several facets of poverty prevalent in the Paraja society. The 'empty cooking pots', 'tattered clothes', 'patches on clothes', 'cheap aluminium utensils' behind the bamboo curtains give the picture of an impoverished society (pp. 207-208). The bonded labourers in the novel seem to be in a more miserable state than the other characters, as they are deprived of proper food, shelters and clothes to protect their life from the dire predicaments. The outside darkness that is 'dense' and 'close' is nothing compared to the inner darkness that is intensified due to the innumerable times of twists, turns and torments in their life (p. 229). Their huts are like a 'cattle-shed' with the rotten grass thatch inhabited by snakes, scorpions and white ants. In short, it is a horrible place for human existence. They are divested of strength and voice to stand against odds. None

of them dares to raise a single word of protest against the oppression caused by the voracious wealth-hoarder but soliloquize in the ‘darkness’ of their ‘little cells’ (p. 37). The frequent use of the term ‘dark’ in *Paraja*, symbolises the wretchedness and dejection in the life of those people (p. 368). There is a melancholic atmosphere wherein “everything was passing away in the same unchanging rhythm, endlessly, into the same oblivion...” (p. 296). The novelist has selected vocabulary, diction and imageries not only to convey his genuine concern for the tribe but has also made use of the de-familiarization effect to sensitize the readers to the lives of poverty-stricken people. Though he has tried to make the readers aware of the innumerable challenges faced by Paraja people, he has been careful not to portray indigence as their only identity or their way of life.

‘Powdered mango’, ‘tamarind seed’, ‘roots’, ‘leaves’, broth cooked with the ‘larvae of wild wasps’ are described to be constituents of the Paraja culinary system and the novel also figuratively comments how the flesh of the Kondh is ‘toothsome’ due to their intake of the flesh of monkeys (pp. 200, 273). The Parajas have been shown as snake-eaters in the novel. *Adibhumi*, a novel by the renowned Odia novelist Pratibha Ray, depicts a similar identity of the Bonda tribe regarding their culinary habits (Roy, 2015). Eating habits are often associated with status, civilization and the advancement of a class. In *Paraja*, the novelist has highlighted the abject poverty and other problems faced by the Paraja people with empathy but he has also blamed their luck, backwardness, isolation for the same using several images which signify the conditions of the people (p. 37). The depiction of hills and forests situated in the ‘unmapped corner’ of the world suggests a primordial way of life of the natives who are ‘luckless’ or in a way destined to survive under harsh circumstances. Their existence in the unknown corner of the world is a clear indication of their non-availability on the social scene. The symbol ‘map’ plays a significant role when it comes to the representation of the identity of a culture. Pioneering anthropologist Henrietta Lidchi has discussed it in her seminal essay “The Poetics and Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures”. She has pointed out how the description of the location of a culture significantly defines the representation of its identity. She explains how the exhibition of an ethnic culture through maps is basically the projection of a different world wherein the unfamiliar might be made comprehensible (Lidchi 1997). The whole of Lidchi’s interpretation of Western ways of

representation of indigenous cultures may not be applicable here but the geographical arena which the novelist creates in *Paraja* gives the impression of an unknown world whose identity has to be searched for. The natives as the novel portrays survive in scarcity and are destined to suffer. But the novelist has not highlighted only those aspects but has made use of visual imageries to draw attention towards the hierarchal boundaries that are shared between the dominant and the indigenous. The depiction of traditional and customary practices also go side by side with the story of Sukru Jani's fight against the belligerent world. Life is celebrated through the tune of the musical instrument 'dungu dunga' and the rhythm of folk dances, through the hardships of relationships and marriages, through the unique practices of festivals and rituals. The songs and poems go hand in hand with the prosaic expression just the way the tribal women dance keeping in pace with the men of the tribe. The symbols, images and rhythm found in the songs and incantations ease out the seriousness of the prosaic expressions. But sometimes rhythm and resonance in prose are achieved through images, diction, metaphors, symbols and other figures of speech. The English translation features the best of the Odia original when it comes to the use of different images but the subtleties of parallelism and contrasts are more prominent in the source text:

Kuhudi chirichiri doora Kondha gaanra
 Jodi boienfire gotae puruna kondha ragini
 Duietara, Khudi upare Khali godia godi (Mohanty, 2014, p. 427).

In Bikram K. Das's translation the line reads thus:

Through the mist came the sound of two
 Kondh flutes played together, the notes
 Chase each other through the mist ... (Das, 1987, p. 359)

As described in the passage, the notes of the flutes played by the Kondh chase each other. This tune gives the impression of melodious poesy; it communicates something intense through poetic devices. The fine nuances of the original text cannot be captured through translation. But, in spite of the limits of translation, the translator has attempted to keep the essence of the source text in the best possible ways.

Another illustration may clarify the point better: Eka funkake sabu udigala, chutia mushara sabu dhana daulata gala. (Mohanty, 2014, p. 25)

This sentence has been rendered in English thus: “In the same way, a single puff of wind can destroy what has taken a field mouse a lifetime to amass” (Das, 1987, p. 37).

The condition of man has been compared with that of a field mouse. The endeavor of the mouse can go in vain by a mere single blow of wind just the way a human being can lose everything due to a cruel twist of fate. In his critique *Kathashilpi Gopinath Mohantynka Kalajayi Kruti Paraja* [*Paraja: The Timeless Creation of Gopinath Mohanty*], Surendra Maharana (1993) has observed how the novelist has skilfully employed the devices of comparison and poetic notes throughout the narrative.

The novelist’s knowledge regarding the Paraja culture is unquestionably vast as his reconstruction of tribal lexicon, folktales and songs testify to this very fact. His experiences with the tribal folks have helped him represent a tribe which cherishes its existence amidst forests and hills of Odisha. One of the unique features of the novel is the balance between the Odia vocabulary and the tribal lexicon. One doesn’t overshadow the other. Though the images and symbols are found in Odia, the tribal words have kept their identity intact and both languages don’t clash with each other. The tribal characters are interacting with each other in their native language but when it comes to delivering long speeches, they are speaking in Odia. The writer has maintained coherence in juxtaposing both languages and also in switching between them depending upon the situation. In *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe has not translated the native words into English but has used them as they are to capture the essence of Igbo language as a result of which these words have maintain their originality. Similarly, the tribal idiom in *Paraja* has not lost its identity and there is an integration of Paraja vocabulary to the narrative. The cultural revitalization through language has been achieved by both the novelists. However, Ravi Shankar Mishra has identified a sense of uneasiness on the part of Mohanty in writing the native dialects in Odia script. Mishra has reflected on the linguistic aspect of the novel in his critical text *Tika O Tippani* [Notes and Observations] and has described how the stark contrast between the

'alarabalara' (incoherent) talk of the tribal characters and the razor-sharp statements of the moneylender signifies the supremacy of one group and the marginality of the other (Mishra, 2005, p. 24).

Many symbols, metaphors and other expressions of the source text are not found in the English translation. For example, the source text mentions the names of some historical places and rulers to indicate whether Paraja people are affected by monarchy: Parajas do not care who the 'Muslim Aurangzeb' or 'Maratha Shivaji' were and they are not bothered to know who 'Siraj ud-Daula' or 'Warren Hastings' were (Mohanty, 2014). These names are symbols of power and interestingly they do not find a place in the translated version of the text. It simply narrates that Paraja people do not comprehend anything beyond their farm lands and are indifferent to the rise and fall of kings. (Das, 1987). Similarly, there are other expressions which have been manipulated in the translated text. In the Odia text, the novelist has addressed the people as beasts of the jungle which symbolize aggression, fierceness, savagery etc. (Mohanty, 2014). But there is no direct association of tribal people with animals in the translated version. The translator has mentioned them but in a subdued and refined manner (Das, 1987). The metaphorical association of Paraja people with animals to highlight their wild aspects is more conspicuous in the original text.

The novelist has adopted a lyrical style to narrate the story of the Paraja tribe in general and the plight of the protagonist Sukru Jani in particular. The poetic devices are thus part and parcel of the novel to depict both the pathos and symphony of human existence. According to the translator, "flowers bloom only to droop dreams; 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, 1987, p. vii). The translator has tried to maintain the flavor of the original work but he has admitted the limitation of translation and has mentioned that "no translation can hope to capture the varied riches of Gopinath Mohanty's Odia prose" (p. viii). The accurate and appropriate use of lyrical devices by the novelist has not only enriched the novel but has also helped him portray the world of the Paraja tribe in a realistic manner.

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