



Trepidation of Change: Analysing the Somatic De-recognition of Mother Nature in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*

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Abstract

Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja* depicts the deracination of the Paraja tribal community of Odisha and the simultaneous disintegration of their indigenous percipience of ecological maintenance. The conceptualization of ecofear is not an exclusive fear of de-recognition with the natural environment for the Paraja tribe; on the contrary, it is a distinct sense of synesthetic fear that is comprehensive and interlinked with the fear of being catapulted into a transformed nature that propagates a feeling of alienation and estrangement. This paper will articulate how the synesthetic fear conceives the loss of the quintessence of indigenous life at the heart of nature. With the advent of the new modes of perceiving land in terms of its utilitarian use, there has been a considerable reduction in the subtle experiences of sensing the land and identifying with it on a symbolic level. This evolving relationship with land with humans is of prime concern in the context of its consequences in the 21st century. This paper will attempt to explore how somatic de-recognition with place forms the locus of indigenous ecofear. Somatic de-recognition refers to the inability to experience a sense of belongingness with place of habitation that holds within it the history of ancestors. This paper will also explicate the indigenous perspective on the trajectory of environmental adjustments, which they fear would lead to the gradual degeneration of human beings.

Keywords: Sense of Place, Ecofear, Topophilia, Indigenous community, Identity, De-recognition

The environmental emergency of the present times vividly corroborates the massive imbalance and collapse of ecosystems worldwide. The acceleration of environmental calamities as a consequence of unrestrained anthropogenic interference in the ecological cycle has aggravated the human's fear of nature. This deep fear of nature in the contemporary era is cultivated with the consciousness of the human inability to artificially control the imbalance in the ecosystem through technologies.

The anthropogenic period articulated ecophobia by projecting nature as 'the enemy of human civilisation' (Fisher 7). Simon C. Estok, in his *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, defines ecophobia as "a uniquely human psychological condition that prompts antipathy toward nature" (qtd. in Oppermann). He establishes that ecophobia can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness. In her review of Estok's *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, Serpil Oppermann notes Estok's view on ecophobia "as an irrational fear of nature and a groundless hatred of the natural world human beings seem to have adapted and are suffering from whether they consciously recognize it or not" (Oppermann 325).

Ecofear or the deep fear of nature has existed since eons in different forms and perspectives. In the Indigenous groups ecofear is often embedded in their cultural and religious practices that accentuated on an ethical bond between human and natural world. R. M. Fisher, in his essay, “Ecocriticism, Ecophobia and Indigenous Criticism,” points to the Indigenous values in which the “fear of Nature is paradoxically situated with love of Nature” (Fisher 3). He advocates that the often unconscious worldviews and perceptions often affect our manner of understanding nature and the fear associated with it. Fisher vividly distinguishes the fear-based ideology of the dominant worldview from the love-based Indigenous worldview(s). The fear-based perception promotes the feeling of hatred and animosity towards nature on the other hand, while the love-based worldview defines the fear in terms of an ethical and reverential communion.

In their essay “Ecophobia, Reverential Eco-fear, and Indigenous Worldviews” Rayson K. Alex and S. Susan Deborah have articulated ecofear as a “cultural tool that can be used traditionally to establish the interconnection between humans and ecology” (Alex and Deborah 423). They have highlighted on the gradual “degeneration the indigenous reverential eco-fear ethical paradigm into ecophobia, which they contend is a result of cultural and economic colonization of indigenous communities in India by non-indigenous mainstream Indian society” (Estok 382).

The lack of moral relations and conscious comprehension of nature is fuelled by the usurping of land through private ownership and by forceful eviction of the tribal stewards who identify with the topographical realities and place-based relation with the land. This paper will accentuate on land relations of the Paraja Tribe in the Koraput district of Odisha and explore how the contemporary degeneration of the community brought about by exploitation of the landscape has materialised their ecofear. The sublime contemplation of land by the Paraja community reflects both their holistic cognition of the world and their sustainable way of life that fosters their interconnection with the land.

The post-independent India observed an enhancement in the emergence of materialization of nature that denied any ethical approach to land and this new anthropocentric perspective became instrumental to the “epochal consciousness” (Chakrabarty, 03:15–05:21) of modern sensibility. This alteration of ideology in society traumatized the Indigenous communities and threatened their spatio-material balance with nature. Human encroachment and incursions have remained oblivious to the significance of Indigenous communities' wisdom and their contributions to the timeless coexistence of human beings and nature where humans participate in the narrative of nature instead of becoming a resource extracting gyre of utilitarianism. The ignorance of “rational fear” embedded in the Indigenous knowledge has led way to the contemporary “irrational fear” of nature. The oral narratives have projected ecofear as an ethical fear that propagates a deep sense of place and limits human actions on natural resources.

Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja* (1945), written in Odia and translated into English by Bikram K. Das renders an evocative image of the strenuous struggle of the Paraja people for protecting their land and sustaining their existence in a new world where mercantile aspirations and profit-marketeering penetrate the pro-ecological sensibilities of land ethics. Written decades earlier, *Paraja* forewarned the commencement of a materialized era marked with an in-human ethos that would disrupt the entire web of relations in the ecosystem. This paper will define the

concept of ecofear in the novel from an indigenous perspective and evaluate how these experiences become a petrifying part of native existence.

“Their [tribal] resistance is an expression of their ecological perturbations and fear of the retaliation of the formidable force of nature...”

Indigenous ecofear specifies the foreboding of the collapse of not just the physical space but predominantly of the identity and culture that constitutes the very essence of any community or individual's life. The construction of manufactured landscapes and extraction of resources by multinational companies in the pretence of development induces in the culturally rich Paraja tribe the fear of being deracinated and uprooted from their land, labour, and livelihood. Ecological consciousness of the Paraja tribe forms the centre of their cultural and religious values. The tribe perceives that it is the divine grace of their supreme deity *patrabuda* and his companion *Jakar*, the earth goddess, that endows the clan with food for life, and thus they have high regard for them.

This deferential attitude towards earth and its elements prevents the tribe from viewing nature as a mercantile entity. The absence of proper connectivity in these secluded areas had protected the Paraja adivasi tribe and their environment from the civilized world's gluttonous eyes. Modernization and social developments have immensely affected the cultural, social, and economic scenario of the tribe. The area's rich land has attracted giant conglomerates to convert it into a resource extracting hub, and thus the natives stay in the constant fear of being displaced and de-territorialized from their origins.

The introduction and coalition of the outside world and civilized values through these socially refashioned situations have posed a threat to the unique cultural identities of the Paraja community. The lack of proper economic means has made the Paraja people victims of impoverishment. The desperate youths of the tribe are forced to cross the ethnic and cultural threshold and become a part of the mainstream world. The government has set up certain provisions for the tribe but that doesn't restrict the gradual loss of the ethnic heritage and cultural legacy. The trials and tribulation of the tribes brought about by civilized development can be related to P. Sainath's concept of misplaced development. It exposes how development initiated to aid in the protection and growth of tribes in actuality degrades their condition.

Paraja centres on the character of Sukru Jani, a Paraja tribe member, whose ideas are based on an intimate connection with nature, and also on the character of Ramachandra Bisoi, the *sahukar* (moneylender), who for the author, is an embodiment of an all-engulfing materialistic civilisation. Translator Bikram. K. Das perceives *Paraja* as a speculative sight of the commencing doomed future of the tribes and the “gradual corrosion of innocence by a creeping, crawling, lurking evil is as maddening as any modern method of torture: it not only destroys but debases and humiliates” (Das vi- vii). The novel vividly explicates the biophilic attributes of the tribal community and their reverence towards nature and how their displacement from ancestral land and commodification of the natural resources infused in them a sense of foreboding of an unrestrained ecological crisis. Their resistance is an expression of their ecological perturbations and fear of the retaliation of the formidable force of nature in response to the human transgressions and unnatural alterations.

Place of habitation serves to establish fundamental synergy between human beings and nature. Sense of place extends the concept of physical space and reckons it as a living embodiment of life, purpose, memory, identity, and imagination of human beings. It reveals a deep emotional attachment and loyalty towards the land we live in. Sense of place explicates an intense form ‘Topophilia,’ a term coined by Yi-Fu Tuan to define the affective bond between human beings and the land they inhabit. In his work *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan has highlighted how “human experience with space and place has influenced, in particular, the development of human geography” (Olsen 2). Tuan advocates that the concept of sense of place can also generate the feeling of fear of landscape in human beings. In the Indigenous communities, the concept of ecofear is integral in values that encourage an emotional communion with landscape. Through myths and folktales these communities maintain that the unpredictable and furious forms of nature can be avoided by establishing an affective and ethical bond with nature. Thus the Indigenous ecofear can also be comprehended as the fear of losing an affective connectivity with place.

Place, for the Indigenous community, forms the locus of their identity and history. Living with the land for them means to remain rooted in their heritage and “smell and taste the flesh of land” (McGinnis and McGinnis 1). Celebration of landscapes by Indigenous communities in all corners of the world highlights the universality of land-based relations. Like Gopinath Mohanty, land-based writers such as Leslie Marmon Silko, Linda Hogan, Joy Harjo, Mahasweta Devi also portray the sense of place in the Indigenous lands that resonate through festivals, rituals, and religious practices. They also expose the decline in this sustainable culture through forceful injection of modernisation in these lands.

The transformation of land through its domestication erases the memories of these topographically inclined communities with their spatio-heredity and history and thus, they constantly endeavour to protect their place from outside intervention. Cherokee writer Diane Glancy in her *Pushing the Bear* delineates the Cherokees' intense agony and anguish in the trails of tears and their sufferings on being uprooted from the land of their origin. The natives view nature as a celestial force and believe any restructuring with a gluttonous purpose would infuriate the spirits of the land. This fear of nature-spirits is marked with a great sense of reverence; reverence for the land that nurtures life. Rayson K. Alex and S. Susan Deborah term this Indigenous fear of nature, marked with an intimate attachment and adoration, as “Indigenous Reverential Eco-fear” (Alex and Deborah 423). They note that “Indigenous Reverential Ecofear” or IRE is “an ethical contract of reverence and a transcendental connection with the materiality of the world” (Alex and Deborah 423). IRE is predominantly manifested through the worship of natural elements such as stones, trees, groves, streams, and mountains.

In Mohanty's *Paraja*, the tribe perceive that the divine beings design all human actions and fate, and thus, they seek their blessings before any event or festival that is important to the tribe. The advent of spring in the community is “signalled by the call of three barking-deer in the forest” (Mohanty 144). The villagers walk together in a procession into the forest to invoke the goddess of spring who dwells deep in the woods, along with *Basumati*, the Earth goddess, *Jhakar*, the god of all seasons and *Bagh- Debata*, the tiger god. For the Parajas the shrine of spring goddess is an “ancient and enormous mango tree” and the sight of such rugged beauty, wilderness and magnanimity of the tree inspires “awe and devotion” (146). The invocation song for “the mighty god of spring” (146) marks the beginning of a new time in the lives of the tribe;

time that is delineated not in terms of months or years but experienced through the change in season and harvest of crops. The song includes their sacred pledge to celebrate the rites “every year in the month of Chaitra” (146) to welcome the spring god whose grace would endow the hill with prosperity. It exposes the material fear embedded within their prayer to the gods of seasons, such as the trees being barren, loss of harmony in the forest.

The community's existence, availability of resources, and environmental balance in their place are all dependent on the grace of the spirits of nature. The invocation and the rituals performed before the commencement of celebration is an ethical action on the part of the tribe to facilitate the flow of nature that controls life. The ecofear explicated in this song is the fear of poverty, fear of living on barren earth, the fear of being prey to the wild animals and the fear of losing love from the community. For instance, mortgaged land inflicts in Sukru Jani the perennial fear of losing it forever. For him, the land is a link that connects individuals with their ancestors and losing the land would mean being haunted by the ancestral spirits even after death. Sukru Jani's inability in maintaining the ethical contract of reverence with the land instigates in him a deep sense of ecofear.

The desolated and dispirited ambiance of Sukru Jani's house during the festival marks the impending doom of his family. Sukru Jani did not understand the civilised concept of conservation but he was aware of the permanence of land and thus wanted it to be passed on to all his generations to come. His fear of losing the bond with his ancestors formed through the land and consequently estranging his future generations from their sense of place. This anticipation of a disrupted bond with nature in the present that injects fear of having obliterated past and, evolving into an obscure future can be construed a heightened form of IRE.

Sukru Jani becomes an embodiment of all the tribal and Indigenous communities whose place is threatened by the capitalist world's encroachment. The deep connection of the tribes formed with nature is based on a cognitive understanding of ecological interrelations. Contemporary environmentalists perceive Chinese Buddhist TuShun's interpretation of the 'Jewel net of Indra' to be significant in comprehending nature's integration and interconnectedness. The Jewel net of Indra, also referred to as the net of Indra, is made up of glittering jewels and all the jewels are connected to form a spider web-like structure. The jewels of the net reflect each other's image and thus “in one jewel there are all other jewels” (Shun 59) and all jewels are there in each jewel. The jewel net of Indra renders a picture of an indefinite and integrated world. It creates the notion of trans-self by connecting the Cartesian dualism of self and the other. This understanding of a larger self or trans-self by the Paraja tribe is evident in their communal way of living. Indigenous communities believe in the holistic form of nature, and thus their fear for the loss of natural integration is an implicit fear for internal dispersion. For Sukru Jani and the Paraja people the land was not just mere soil, but part of their bodies and soul and they rebelled in their ways to protect it from the intrusion of outsiders who had no regard for their land.

Gopinath Mohanty's works reflected his concern for the social issues of his time. Being a civil servant in the Koraput district, he was aware of the indigenous tribes' life experiences. His works *DadiBudda (The Ancestor)*, *Paraja*, *Amrutara Santana (The Dynasty of The Immortals)*, thematically presented the Indigenous tribes' lives. Mohanty's place in the government did not hold him back from exposing the reality of situations and how the government and the officials detrimentally contributed to the tribes.

In *Paraja*, Mohanty's foresight, comprehending environmental discrimination as a major social issue retains the novel's contemporariness. In *Paraja*, environmental discrimination is presented through the denial of tribal access to the land by the power structures. The power structure then exemplified by the landowners is represented by government and resource extracting conglomerates in the contemporary period. The struggle to maintain a livelihood and protect the inhabited place and the fear of losing human rights through land-loss continues till today. For instance, the proposal of British-based mining company Vedanta to extract bauxite from the Niyamgiri hills of Odisha has terrorised the native Dongria Kondh tribe. The Kondhs, who revere the hills as their god, live with the constant fear of losing their life and livelihood. The sense of ecofear in them becomes evident in their fear of losing the hills, which maintains the biodiversity of the Western Ghats, and the bauxite that enables continuous flow of perennial streams in the place. In the post-independence period, lands belonging to the tribes were captured by money lenders through manipulation and threats.

Private corporations are now attempting to capture these lands from the tribes to make the rich resources embedded within it consumable in the market. *Paraja* gives a vivid picture of the tribal fear of the legal system and perceived it to be a vast system that would engulf innocent beings. "The tribesman had a natural horror of law" (Mohanty 122) and were afraid to do anything unlawful. When Sukru Jani and his son Mandia approached the judicial system against the tyranny of the moneylender, they became the victims of the law. They were mistreated and never freed from the fetters of their debt no-matter how much they worked or how much they paid back. The novel also shares a glimpse of contamination of the indigenous culture by the change in values enforced by the outside world. The Construction Supervisors' money and gifts tempt the *Paraja* people to be a part of the construction project.

This inclination towards material gain not only meant abandoning their ancestral culture of agriculture but also leaving the land and dissociating them from the community and communal way of living. Sukru Jani's daughters Jili and Bili perceived that working in a construction site would be an opportunity for them to have a good life and a relief from poverty. This dilution of indigenous values, culture and lifestyle petrified the tribal community as this would detach them from their place and would infuriate the divine spirits. The contamination is not limited to culture but extends to the land and agricultural practices. The orange trees planted in the mortgaged land by the moneylender for mercantile benefits injected fear in Sukru Jani. He was conscious that these capital methods of agriculture would decline the fertility of his land. The modern market agencies removed the tribes from their land ownership and assigned them as tillers with no right on the land or its produce.

Paraja portrays a counter hereditary aspect of an individual's link with the place of his existence. This aspect is functioning as a psychological reprogramming in Sukru Jani's mind as he is undergoing the swift movements of change in terms of his land, family psychology and all that he assumed to be a conventional reality. Sukru Jani's confrontation with change is inevitably linked with the idea of an uncertainty; not only in terms of his material concerns but also in terms of his bewilderment with a new relation that will be established between nature and human beings. His land becomes a micro unit in the visualization of a macroscopic scenario where the farthest stretches of Mother Nature will be hindered by human's mercantile requirements. This sense of uncertainty for Sukru Jani consequently changes into a fear that plays an instrumental role in affecting the foundational belief system of an unconditional and

irreplaceable bond with land. Hence the ecofear in *Paraja* is experienced through an epiphanic realization that occurs in a diachronic plane where Sukru Jani's past, present and future collide and coalesce in a strange reality of being and consciousness.

“...the novel is not a fear of cataclysm and destruction; on the contrary, it is an unusual and uncanny sensation of visualizing the past and the future based on [the] present...”

Mohanty's narrative charts the trajectory of the nature-culture binary that is embedded in the images of nature and the human's reaction to it. This novel exclusively becomes an embodiment of an era which can be identified as a narrative at the threshold of the rise of the anthropocene and ecophobia. Sukru Jani stands at the edge of this new-found sense of human development and almost in a flash-forward foresight is catapulted to a murky and desolate future in the anthropocene that longs to go back to an era which had been decimated by apparently disconnected small scale land and nature utilization procedures. This exponential change of the ecology that is entangled with complex ecomaterial situations is a real time concern for the tribal consciousness that incites a fear from an unknown 'ecology without nature' (Morton).

Mohanty's narrative articulates the trepidation of change that follows with transformation. The characters in the novel are victimized by an uncertainty that creates a visual and psychological lacuna in the linearity of their historio-material and spatio-temporal understanding of land-based relation.

The fear that pervades in the novel is not a fear of cataclysm and destruction; on the contrary, it is an unusual and uncanny sensation of visualizing the past and the future based on present day anthropocentric exploitation of land. It is a realization that can be termed as a time-lapse experience, which predicts a flash forward into the barren future of the anthropocene, who have denied their gods and their origins in order to extract and improvise. It implies an abandoned landscape that will remain as a wasteland when the tribal origins and stewardship obviates from the face of the earth. This is the vehemently staggering fear of ecological disruption that will in turn reconfigure the real time subjectivity of humans inhabiting in any landscape across time. As Dipesh Chakraborty mentions in his *The Climate of History: Four Theses* that humans are a geological force who reorient the comprehensive living relationship with nature into a new form of existence that is unsettling, Mohanty's narrative implies the similar context from a grass-root level back in time where humans are actually inventing ways to terraform the planet for their own species-centric interests.

Mohanty's novel is a precursor of the 21st century narratives that represent and engage with the issues of environmental readjustment. Mohanty's *Paraja* presupposes the contemporary treatment of nature by portraying the radically evolving attitudes of the human toward their environment. He critiques the new trajectory of species (human) exclusivity, aided by newfound aspects of commercialism and utility perspectives that deviate them from the age old tradition of environmental stewardship. Other than performing the role of an indigenous character, he embodies everything that can be considered the last vestige of the human reverence to mother-nature. Sukru Jani's fear of a changed landscape is intensely ontological as it comprehensively

affects his entire being by witnessing a new emerging reality of human-nature relationship that is based on transaction and exploitation.

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