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Ecocriticism in the Novels of Gopinath Mohanty: Indigenous Worldviews and Environmental Consciousness

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Abstract

Gopinath Mohanty (1914–1991), one of India's most significant novelists of the twentieth century and a Janpith awardee, produced a substantial body of work documenting the lives, cultures, and ecological relationships of Odisha's tribal communities. This paper examines Mohanty's novels—particularly *Paraja* (1945), The *Ancestor* (1944), and *Amrutara Santana* (1947)—through an ecocritical lens, exploring how his literary corpus voices indigenous environmental worldviews and critiques the ecological destruction wrought by colonial and postcolonial modernity. Drawing on foundational ecocritical concepts such as bioregionalism, topophilia, and ecofear, this analysis demonstrates that Mohanty's novels function as what ecocritic Lawrence Buell terms "environmental texts"—works that represent the nonhuman environment as an active presence rather than mere backdrop. Mohanty's fiction illuminates the symbiotic relationship between tribal communities and their natural surroundings, the epistemological foundations of indigenous ecological knowledge, and the devastating consequences of development paradigms that sever these primordial connections. This paper argues that Mohanty's novels constitute a prescient ecological critique that anticipates contemporary environmental humanities discourses while offering valuable insights for understanding indigenous environmental justice in the twenty-first century.

Keywords: ecocriticism, Gopinath Mohanty, indigenous literature, environmental humanities, bioregionalism, tribal ecology

Introduction

Ecocriticism, as a literary and cultural theoretical framework, examines the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Emerging as a distinct field in the late twentieth century, ecocriticism has expanded from its initial focus on nature writing and Romantic poetry to encompass diverse literary traditions, postcolonial environmental concerns, and indigenous ecological knowledges. As Yeshpal and Chopra observe, ecocriticism encompasses "everything related to the human and nonhuman elements i.e. earth, water and sky houses, agriculture, caves, hills, plants, trees, oceans, seasons, animals, wind, ancient architecture, rocks, soil etc.," constituting "a beautiful gallery of portraits in ecocriticism" .

Within this expanding field, the works of Gopinath Mohanty hold particular significance. Mohanty, who served as an administrator in Odisha's Koraput district from 1938 onwards, developed intimate knowledge of the Kondh, Paraja, Gadaba, and Saora tribal communities. His extended residence among these communities enabled him to document their cultures, languages, and lifeways with exceptional depth. He authored five books on tribal languages alongside his literary works, demonstrating a commitment to understanding indigenous worldviews on their own terms rather than through the lens of colonial anthropology.

This paper undertakes an ecocritical analysis of Mohanty's major novels, arguing that his literary corpus articulates a coherent indigenous environmental philosophy that challenges both colonial narratives of "unclaimed" wilderness and postcolonial development paradigms that treat tribal lands as resources for extraction. The analysis draws on recent scholarship on Mohanty's work, including Swayamsidha's concept of "somatic de-recognition" to describe indigenous alienation from ancestral lands, Mahapatra's examination of bioregionalism and ecological nationalism, and Jena and Das's exploration of tribal "cosmo-vision".

Theoretical Framework: Ecocriticism and Indigenous Environmental Thought

Ecocriticism provides a useful framework for analyzing Mohanty's fiction because it attends to the ways literature represents human-nature relationships and critiques anthropocentric worldviews. Bioregionalism emphasizes the importance of understanding human communities within their specific ecological contexts, recognizing that sustainable lifeways emerge from intimate knowledge of local ecosystems. Mahapatra's analysis of *Paraja* draws on bioregionalist thought to examine how indigenous territorial sovereignty conflicts with state-centric development models.

Topophilia, a concept developed by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, refers to the affective bonds between people and place—the love of place that emerges from lived experience and cultural memory. Swayamsidha applies this concept to *Paraja*, exploring how the Paraja tribe's "somatic de-recognition" from their homeland constitutes a form of "ecofear"—a comprehensive, synesthetic fear of losing both ecological and cultural identity.

Indigenous cosmo-vision encompasses the spiritual, epistemological, and ethical frameworks through which tribal communities understand their relationship with the natural world. Jena and Das's study of *The Ancestor* demonstrates that Mohanty's representation of tribal "eco-spiritual knowledge" challenges colonial and modern devaluation of indigenous ecological practices as unscientific.

These theoretical perspectives converge on a central insight: for indigenous communities, environmental degradation is inseparable from cultural destruction. As Mohapatra notes, "The land for an indigenous community is a significant part of their collective consciousness"—not merely a resource to be exploited but a constitutive element of identity, history, and spiritual belonging.

The Natural World in Mohanty's Literary Imagination

Mohanty's novels are distinguished by their vivid, immersive depictions of the Eastern Ghats landscape. *The Ancestor* opens with a description that exemplifies his approach to representing the natural world: "The distant horizon is not so distant here. Hills stand one piled on other creating an illusion of innumerable vimans. The peaks of the hills, small and large, incline towards a valley at their centre. The valley is covered by the green forest. The river Muran flows through this beautiful valley, from one end of the highland to the other".

This passage does not merely describe a setting; it establishes a relationship between human perception and the environment. The hills create "an illusion of innumerable vimans"—divine flying palaces from Hindu mythology—suggesting that the landscape is itself sacred. The absence of a distant horizon implies a world that is knowable, traversable, and intimately familiar to its inhabitants. Jena and Das argue that Mohanty's representation of the tribal world draws on Romantic sensibilities in its celebration of nature's sublimity and beauty, but differs fundamentally in its orientation. Unlike Romantic nature writing, which often positions the human observer as a privileged consciousness contemplating an external nature, Mohanty's tribal characters are "essentially part of" the natural world, their lives "predominated by certain beliefs and practices concerning nature, tradition and culture". This distinction is crucial: for Mohanty's tribal communities, nature is not an object of aesthetic contemplation but the medium of everyday existence, the source of sustenance, medicine, and spiritual meaning.

The natural world in Mohanty's fiction is characterized by its fecundity and harmony. The "transparent water of river Muran glitters in the rays of sun," the "undulating yellow alasi fields" and "bluish green ragi fields" stretch alongside dense forests, demonstrating that "both soil and water are productive and pristine". This productivity supports a life of sufficiency rather than accumulation. The tribal people of Lulla harvest rice, alasi, suan, ragi, and castor, collect forest products, hunt, fish, and rear animals, achieving "tranquil happiness" and "peaceful enjoyment" without the amenities of modern life.

Indigenous Eco-Spiritual Knowledge and the Cosmo-Vision

Central to Mohanty's representation of tribal life is the concept of what Jena and Das term "eco-spiritual knowledge"—the integration of ecological practice with spiritual belief. In *The Ancestor*, this cosmo-vision manifests in everyday practices, celebrations, and rituals that reinforce the community's connection to the natural world. The harvest celebration in spring, the full-moon night dances, and the communal activities that punctuate agricultural labor are not merely social events but expressions of a worldview in which human well-being is inseparable from the rhythms of nature. Celebration, festivities and practices concerning nature and culture, as the part of their belief system, seem to be the central aspects of the traditional paradigm of the tribal life. Again simplicity and innocence are the hallmarks of this life, where the meaning of happiness is not taken in a modern mechanical sense; rather it is an intense realization, derived from their traditional practices, belief in divine providence, co-existence with nature etc.

This characterization might risk romanticizing tribal life, but Jena and Das are careful to note that Mohanty's portrayal does not present "the romanticizing or glorifying view of the traditional paradigm of tribal life, nor does it attempt to justify the validity and superiority of tribal practices over the scientific prudence and instrumental approach of modernity. Instead, Mohanty's fiction demonstrates how these practices constitute cultural identity and provide frameworks for meaning-making that are threatened by external forces.

The novel's depiction of Ram Muduli's recovery from personal grief illustrates this ecological-psychological interdependence. After his son absconds with a Dom girl, Ram experiences profound anguish, but gradually, through engagement with the natural world and community rituals, he returns to life. The full-moon night brings "waves of happiness" that "sprang from the peaks of the hills and spread over the whole area," and the dance provides "some solace, some comfort". This is not mere metaphor but an expression of a worldview in which emotional healing is inseparable from participation in the cycles of nature and community.

Paraja: Land, Dispossession, and the Critique of Development

Paraja (1945) is widely regarded as Mohanty's masterpiece and the most sustained exploration of indigenous-environmental relationships in his oeuvre. The novel traces the tragic disintegration of a Paraja tribal family as they are progressively dispossessed of their land and cultural identity. Through this narrative, Mohanty mounts a powerful critique of colonial and postcolonial development paradigms that treat tribal lands as resources for extraction.

The novel's central theme, as Swayamsidha argues, is "the deracination of the Paraja tribal community of Odisha and the simultaneous disintegration of their indigenous percipience of

ecological maintenance". This deracination operates on multiple levels: economic dispossession through debt and land alienation, cultural disruption through the imposition of alien values, and psychological dislocation through what Swayamsidha terms "somatic de-recognition"—the inability to "experience a sense of belongingness with place of habitation that holds within it the history of ancestors".

Swayamsidha's concept of "ecofear" is particularly illuminating for understanding the novel's ecological dimensions. Ecofear is not simply fear of environmental destruction but a '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". For the Paraja community, the land is not merely property but the repository of ancestral memory, the site of spiritual connection, and the foundation of cultural identity. Its commodification and loss thus constitute a form of existential violence that cannot be captured by economic metrics alone.

Mohapatra's analysis situates *Paraja* within the broader context of postcolonial India's development policies. She argues that "the economic model of growth that India adopted post-independence did not accommodate the idea of tribal territorial sovereignty," and that "ill-conceived industrial policy coupled with failure of land reforms in most parts of the country displaced these peoples, severing the primordial links they had with their land" . Mohanty's novel, written in 1945, anticipates these developments with remarkable prescience, documenting the processes of marginalization that would accelerate after independence. The novel also engages with what Mohapatra terms 'ecological nationalism'—the appropriation of indigenous lands and resources in the name of national development. She examines "a modern state's phallocentric gaze upon native land and resources" in conjunction with bioregionalist alternatives that would recognize indigenous territorial sovereignty and ecological knowledge. *Paraja* functions not only as a chronicle of dispossession but as an articulation of alternative possibilities grounded in indigenous worldviews.

The Ancestor: Tradition, Modernity, and Ecological Continuity

While *Paraja* focuses on the process of disintegration, *The Ancestor* (1944) offers a more nuanced exploration of how tribal communities negotiate between tradition and modernity. The novel presents the village of Lulla as a site where indigenous beliefs and practices persist despite the incursions of colonial modernity. Jena and Das argue that "although the impact of Modernity has influenced their culture to some extent, the central tenets of their tradition remain unaffected". This continuity is not presented as static tradition but as active adaptation. The people of Lulla incorporate Christian elements alongside indigenous beliefs, and

individuals like Ram Muduli navigate between traditional roles and new forms of authority. Yet the ecological foundations of their lifeways remain intact. The novel's celebration of natural cycles, agricultural practices, and communal rituals demonstrates what Jena and Das call "the idea of continuity of such beliefs, practices and traditional Eco-spiritual knowledge in spite of the intervention of colonial modernity".

This continuity is not merely defensive but generative. The natural world in *The Ancestor* is dynamic, characterized by motion and vitality: "The waving of woods and crop fields, the gliding stream of Muran, the flight of the birds, herd of cows grazing along the valley, fishes in the stream, the majestic movement of the clouds along with the dance of the beautiful tribal girls add life to the valley and meaning to life". The novel suggests that indigenous ecological knowledge is not a relic of the past but a living tradition capable of sustaining meaningful human existence in ways that modern instrumental rationality cannot.

Language, Translation, and Ecological Representation

An important dimension of Mohanty's ecocritical significance lies in his linguistic practices. Writing in Odia, he developed a literary language capable of representing tribal worldviews and ecological relationships with precision and sensitivity. His translations of tribal languages—including his grammatical and lexical studies of Kondh, Gadaba, and Saora—reflect a commitment to understanding indigenous cultures on their own terms. The challenges of translating Mohanty's work into English have been acknowledged by his translators. Bikram K. Das, who translated *Paraja* and other works, notes that "it is extremely difficult to render in English the nuances of Gopinath Mohanty's language". These challenges are not merely linguistic but conceptual: the ecological categories and relationships embedded in Odia and tribal languages do not map neatly onto English equivalents. The translation of Mohanty's novels thus involves not only linguistic transfer but cultural translation, requiring readers to engage with different ways of understanding human-nature relationships.

Mohanty's Contemporary Relevance

The ecocritical significance of Mohanty's novels extends beyond their literary merits to their relevance for contemporary environmental debates. As Mohapatra observes, *Paraja* remains relevant because "the economic model of growth that India adopted post-independence" continues to marginalize tribal communities and treat their lands as resources for extraction. The issues of displacement, land alienation, and environmental degradation that Mohanty documented in the 1940s have intensified in subsequent decades, with tribal communities across India facing dispossession for mining, dam construction, and industrial development.

Amitav Ghosh's endorsement of *Paraja* as "one of the classics of Indian literature" further attests to its enduring significance. Ghosh's own work on environmental themes and climate change reflects a similar concern with the intersections of culture, ecology, and justice, suggesting continuities between Mohanty's mid-century tribal novels and contemporary environmental literature.

Conclusion

Gopinath Mohanty's novels constitute a significant contribution to Indian environmental literature and offer rich material for ecocritical analysis. His representation of tribal communities in Odisha illuminates indigenous ecological worldviews that challenge both colonial narratives of "unclaimed" wilderness and development paradigms that treat tribal lands as resources. Through concepts such as eco-spiritual knowledge, somatic de-recognition, and bioregional belonging, Mohanty's fiction articulates a vision of human-nature relationships grounded in the specificities of place, culture, and history.

The ecocritical reading of Mohanty's work undertaken in this paper suggests several conclusions. First, his novels demonstrate that indigenous environmental knowledges are not merely traditional practices to be preserved but living systems of meaning capable of generating sustainable human-nature relationships. Second, his work reveals the violence inherent in development paradigms that sever indigenous communities from their lands, a violence that operates on economic, cultural, and psychological levels simultaneously. Third, his literary techniques—particularly his immersive representation of natural environments and his development of a literary language capable of conveying indigenous worldviews—offer models for environmental writing that avoids both romanticism and instrumentalism.

As the environmental crises of the twenty-first century intensify, the insights embedded in Mohanty's novels become increasingly urgent. His work reminds us that environmental degradation is never merely technical but always also cultural, political, and ethical. The "ecofear" experienced by his tribal characters—the fear of losing not only livelihood but identity, belonging, and meaning—is a fear that resonates across contemporary environmental movements. In articulating indigenous perspectives on "the trajectory of environmental adjustments" and the risk of "the gradual degeneration of human beings" , Mohanty's fiction offers resources for thinking through the challenges of creating just and sustainable futures.

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