

CRITIQUING THE FOURTH WORLD INDIGENOUS TRIBAL CULTURAL IDENTITY IN AFRO-ASIAN LITERATURE

DR. SANGITA T. GHODAKE

ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR

P. D. E. A.'S PROF. RAMKRISHNA MORE

COLLEGE OF ARTS, COMM. & SCI.

AKURDI, PUNE, INDIA

Abstract

The fourth world literature is an umbrella term that covers all marginalized and subjugated sections of the world. The paper entitled 'Critiquing the Fourth World Indigenous Tribal Cultural Identity in Afro-Asian Literature' deals with two prominent continents with a tribal belt. The Republic of Kenya from East Africa is known for her tribal purity and innocence. The paper tries to explore distinct cultural practices of the tribals through NgugiwaThiongO's 'The River Between'. Especially the age-old ritual 'Circumcision' of the Kikuyu tribe has been discussed with new perception. The Indian tribal scenario has been put forward through 'AadivaseeSanskriti: Kala ani Katha' (Tribal Culture: Arts and Stories) (1997) by MurlidharAaphale and ArunPrabhune originally written in Marathi (regional language of Maharashtra state from India) represents the life of five Indian tribal groups and their way of living. The first part of the paper deals with African and Indian tribal scenario with some common features. The second part discusses the tribal life before colonial intrusion and after independence. The third point the research wants to discuss about is 'circumcision' as an emotional bonding of the tribals with their culture and post-modern perception of it. Fourthly the paper tries to discuss in brief Indian tribal culture with the selected five short stories representing five different tribes from Maharashtra region. The concluding part tries to suggest how a tribal can have pan-local and pan-global experience without losing one's indigenous identity. (Words: 239)

Key terms: Kikuyu tribe, Aadivasees, Africa, India, Circumcision, indigenous, culture etc.

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-DR. SANGITA T. GHODAKE

Right from Rabindranath Tagore to Present day poets, every noble mind has expected the world 'without fear' and the 'head held high' into that 'heaven' everyone wants to awake. The Utopian world in the imagination of the great thinkers and philosophers has been broken into dystopian narrow domestic walls of isms and conflicts of imperialism, capitalism, eurocentrism, class, caste and creed. According to Karl Marx, the history of the world is the history of conflicts between the economic classes. It needs to be restated as it is a history of conflicts among all sorts of discriminations. The present paper tries to focus on tribal belt as a marginalized section of the society that has always been cut off from the main stream. The tribal culture all over the world is struggling hard to survive and stand by the rest of the world but not at the cost of the loss of their indigenous cultural identity. For instance, the tribal culture from the fourth world nations needs recognition as an independent and significant entity of the world. The distinct culture of the tribes across the world is undergoing a constant change. Specifically the change in one's cultural practices has always been a matter of combat and confrontation. The tribal world going through tremendous change is yet far away from the developed nations. The rigid tribal rites and rituals have been constantly threatened in the name of hygiene, religion or education. These practices are under critical and skeptical scrutiny. It has given birth to the controversy of the opposite concept of 'son-of-the-soil' and 'citizen-of-the-World'. The conflict between preserving one's own culture and adjusting with the imposed one can be very well brought out through the tribes from two prominent continents namely Africa and Asia. The present paper is an attempt to find out similarities and differences between way of living of Kenyan and Indian tribes.

The tribal life in Africa and in India was very peaceful before the entry of the colonizer. The native populace had never ever interfered in their cultural practices. Initially the colonizer wanted to preserve the tribes as a role model of a 'primitive man'. But in the due course of time they started opposing and attacking their age-old traditional practices being 'non-sense'. Most of the times, the tribes used to live away from the main stream in the interior either on hills in India or in the ridges in Africa. Each tribal group had their own cultural set up like same clothes, food habits, rites, rituals and customs. They were happy in their own world and did not try to keep contacts outside the tribe. They were compared with wild animals due to their language of cries and gestures. They earned their bread and butter through things available in the nature. They worshipped the mother-earth as their God and never believed to sell or purchase their God! They had their tribal religion and had strong faith in evil powers. In Africa and in India too, the tribals had their own modus operandi for giving justice in which the elderly person used to resolve all clashes and conflicts among the tribals. Similarly both the continents had very strong marriage institution in which the youth had to follow the decisions

of the elders. Due to lack of formal education these people were deeply involved in superstitions. Their main source for living was farming and hunting. They entertained and indulged themselves in singing, dancing and drinking. These are the similarities in the life of tribals in Kenya and India.

The tribals were paid attention by the local governments after independence in post-colonial era. Today they are struggling hard to cope with the educated urban mob by taking formal education and by adapting themselves to modern culture. Most of the governments are trying to uplift them by providing special facilities in education and jobs in order to make them self-reliant. The paper is an attempt to understand psycho-social set-up of some of the tribes from Africa and Asia. NgugiwaThiong'o's novel *The River Between* (1965) is selected as a representative of Kenyan tribal culture of the Kikuyu tribe and *AadivaseeSanskriti: Kala ani Katha* (Tribal Culture: Arts and Stories) (1997) by MurlidharAaphale and ArunPrabhune originally written in Marathi (regional language of Maharashtra state from India) represents the life of five Indian tribal groups and their way of living.

The River Between is concerned with the conflict between the tribal traditional and Christian views of life in the region on the banks of Honia. It mainly depicts the ethnic and evangelical beliefs of the Kenyan countryside. The story takes place in two ridges-Kamenno and Makuyu. It is a story of a youth from the ridges who devotes his life for the mission of educating tribal people and to preserve their tribal culture and traditions. The people of the ridges are conservative and remain loyal to their traditions. The Christian missionaries' entry in the peaceful life of the tribe makes them aware of knowledge and education. The tribe does not bear the missionaries' interference with their traditions and rituals. Ngugi depicts the conflict of the villagers against the missionaries getting involved with the circumcision and draws conclusion through the protagonist Waiyaki that the tribe has to preserve their customs and has also to learn the white man's wisdom through education. The missionary defense is portrayed through Livingstone the Scottish missionary at Siriana and Joshua, a tribal converted Christian preacher. The tribal defense is put forth through Chege and his people. Waiyaki, the educated youth from the ridges, tries to blend both the visions and gives an optimistic note of a free nation, free from the clutches of the First World. The missionary preaching hammers upon the illiterate tribe that Jesus has warned the people that those who refuse Isaiah, the Christian messiah, will remain in darkness. Ngugi in one of his interviews has stated about the present status of cultural conflict in Kenya:

"The conflict of cultures is often seen in the simple terms of a conflict between the rural and the urban, or between tradition and modernity, but this is a deliberate mystification of the real conflict. The conflict is class bound.... There are today in the colonies and the neo-colonial societies two cultures in mortal conflict: a foreign imperialist culture and a national patriotic culture, which is a resistance culture and is both urban and rural. This national culture is in opposition to foreign imperialist exploitation and domination as well as to internal exploitation and oppression by a native ruling class in servile alliance with imperialism". (Thiong'o 1982:133)

The novel deals with age-old tradition of 'circumcision' of Kenyan tribal people. The significance of 'circumcision' in the life of the tribal people of Kameno lies not in the physical act but 'in what it did inside a person', as Waiyaki has himself to realize later. It establishes a bond between the initiate and his society and country. The process of the ritual circumcision is as follows. During the ceremony boys and girls bathe in the river in the morning. It is said that the cold water numbs the skin, which makes the wound less painful during the operation. The day of the ceremony rises:

"Above the beating of drums and jingles, shouts rose from hill to hill to keep awake those who might want to go to sleep. Tonight was the eve of the initiation day; it would see the biggest of all dances". (Thiong'o 1965:40)

Even old men and women dance in a frenzy. Everyone is free to pass vulgar jokes on that day. The group pulls out any person from the circle and asks him to dance. The group then applauds the person who is dancing. The drummers and the soloists take up the name. The men are given horns that they blow madly. The day is celebrated with delicious food. The novel describes male initiation ritual through the protagonist Waiyaki.

Circumcision is performed by an experienced tribal man. Waiyaki takes his bath early morning. The cold water cuts his skin like a sharp knife. He takes this ritual an opportunity to reveal his courage like a man. The son of Chege had proved himself. He is then covered with a white sheet. The pain is unbearable. He pities Muthoni who embraced such a terrific pain. The sheet gets full of blood. Eventually he recovers and thus proves himself as a man. If one denies circumcising oneself he is thrown out of the tribe. The elders consider it as the most important one because it helps them to remain united. It is treated as a foundation of a social structure that gives meaning to their life. At the end of the ritual people plead with words 'GikuyuMurunga' meaning they want to seek God's blessings for their tribe to remain good. Thus in spite of being a very painful process it is very essential for the tribal for not to be an outcast.

Muthoni's death due to the infection in the wound caused by circumcision leads to many interpretations according to the various points of views. Chege, the representative of the tribe thinks that it is due to her father's curse. The tribe gossips that it is due to their conversion from tribe to Christianity and they suspect and exaggerate it as the missionaries may have poisoned her. Above all dying Muthoni has no regret for her decision but she says in great satisfaction that she has seen Jesus and is transformed into a beautiful woman. Her death has defeated Joshua as a father but has made him victorious as a preacher who has sacrificed his daughter for the sake of his principles.

Regarding the missionary's reactions about the death of Muthoni, father Livingstone missionary is of the view that the circumcision should be banned. He tries to convince people with gradual methods but he does not get a positive response. He then starts using pressure by dismissing tribal children from missionary school. Those who cut themselves from the tribal tradition are allowed to send their children in Siriana School. In spite of several threats the

author tries to suggest through his protagonist that tribals are very sensitive about their rituals and want to preserve it at the cost of death. They take it as a license of their marriage and children.

Let us look at various interpretations and points of view about circumcision. FGM (Female Genital Mutilation) is done into three parts namely cutting of clitoris, removal of clitoris and sewing it with a small opening. The Catholic, Protestant and Presbyterians missionary opposed it in the name of hygiene but the hidden agenda behind it was to spread Christianity. Mau-Mau socio-political movement in Kenya opposed it due to loss of local customs and traditions. The anti-circumcision movement was made strong by all social reformers and humanitarians from the West by making laws against it. 'Circumcision through words' was found out as painless alternative by social reformer women from Meru society. It is a rational alternative initiation ritual in which females are circumcised through training and counseling and not through cutting. It was spread all over Africa and now is followed by most of the tribals. It gives a feeling that one remains 'son-of-the-soil' without getting cut. It includes songs, education, celebration and a week of seclusion in which the mothers participate with their daughters. It clearly shows that the tribes are preserving their culture in a new form. Genital mutilation is the age-old practice all over Africa. In India female genital organ is never mutilated but has been given the prestigious status as an object of worship. Indian tribal culture respects women as 'mothers of creation'. There are many temples where female genital is worshipped as the origin of the human life. The tribal life in India reveals scars of caste, class and religion. The mind-set of the tribal born is very well reflected in the following selected stories.

A short story collection *Aadivasee Sanskriti: Kala ani Katha* (Tribal Culture: Arts and Stories) by Murlidhar Aaphale and Arun Prabhune describes tribal culture of India through very beautiful five tribal stories that represent different tribes from Maharashtra region. There are some common features in African and Indian tribal way of living. The stories basically cover prominent tribes like for instance Madiya Gond, Warlee, Bhilla, Mawala and Kolaam that live on the hills with their own modus operandi and rites, rituals, and customs known as their culture.

The very first story *Niwada* (justice) deals with caste based Indian tribal milieu. The low caste tribal boy marries a high caste tribal girl. The other high caste boy of the Panch, the leader, wants to marry but in vain. Both the families are declared culprits for breaking social norms of marriage and are asked to pay huge fine. The boy, though very well educated and working as a government servant, is beaten mercilessly in front of the tribal God in which he dies. The Panch or the Justice then again diplomatically asks the father of the girl that his son can marry his widow daughter just to secure her future life. It brings out simplicity of the tribals due to which anyone can set a trap.

The second story *Bakshish* (prize) is about tribals' love for arts and fine arts. It is a story of a Warlee boy. In an exhibition of Warlee paintings all tribal painters keep their paintings. The author is an eye-witness of the event because he happens to visit the exhibition and

coincidentally again sees the boy in the hotel. All the paintings get sold except the painting that has got the first prize. The painter of the painting is a young boy. He is very hungry and gets fainted in front of a hotel door. The owner of the hotel gives him food and he pays the bill giving his painting to the owner. The author feels very bad for the boy who gifts his art without knowing its real worth. His painting was a Bakshish for the hotel owner who without paying a single penny for his art accepts it heartlessly. The author feels that the tribals are true artists that the society doesn't value.

The third story *Panchayat*(the Court) is a story of Bhilla tribe that describes death rituals of the prominent religions- the Hindus and the Muslims. A Muslim man marries a Hindu Bhilla tribal woman. He is an orphan and very poor whereas she is a daughter of a rich man and a leader known as Patil. The Panchayat, that is governing body of the tribe, decides to punish the man. He has to become slave of his would be father-in-law for a year and then their marriage will be accepted. His devotion and hard work win the heart of his father-in-law. They start living happily in the village but unfortunately the woman dies during her first delivery. The story reaches to the climax as her religious identity is questioned because she does not change her religion after marriage. The Hindus don't want to give Hindu cremation because he gets married with a Muslim and the Muslims don't offer their burial ritual because she had married to a Hindu. At last one Kazee (Muslim priest) does the ritual of burial. The man is again made a criminal by the Hindus for disobedience to the Hindu religion. He proves very brave and wise in the end because he coincidentally gets some money of bandits that he uses to build a school in the village. His motif is to educate the children of the village so that they will not stand against each other in the name of religion.

The fourth story *Mawala*(the Warrior) is a story of a warrior boy from MahadevKoli tribe. It narrates the bravery of a boy who skillfully catches the main spy of Mughals. The Mughals secretly enter into the area of Marathas in order to spy the land. The troop of some brave tribal boys helps the Maratha Sardar but their leader disappears from the scene. He catches the main spy who rescues himself from the tribal troop. He then uses strategy and brings him home and offers hospitality. The spy takes the boy as his well-wisher and stays relax without any burden of getting caught. The boy sets the trap and hands him over to his master. Their Duke takes him in his military. It shows tribals' love for their master and the nation.

The last story *Imaan*(honesty) is a story of a very honest and ardent lover of nature from Kolaam tribe. He is working with a forest officer. The whole day he works in the forest and plants many trees. In the evening he works as a maid servant of the officer. He loves his master and his plantation. One day he hears a conversation between an agent and his master through which he guesses that the master is selling the trees to the agent. He has nurtured these trees like his friends and feels deeply hurt. He tries to convince the master but in vain. The master bullies him and asks him to stay within his limits. The master hits him and he becomes unconscious. His people find him dead. They try to bury him but to everyone's surprise he comes to consciousness. He goes to the police in order to seek their help but on the contrary the police warn his master about his disobedience. He tries to attack his master and during their

fight the tribal man gets seriously injured and dies. The story raises the question that how long the weak will be suppressed by the strong. It also pinpoints exploitation of the marginalized at the hands of the so called power-centers.

The stories are true representation of pure and innocent tribal people who are the victims of the upper castes, classes and religions. Tribal identity as the marginalized section of the society is a scar and stigma to these people from Africa and Asia. Though the tribes have their set of rules and customs but they share one common feeling of backwardness. They are looking at the developed nations for socio-economic support. They have to take change positively and at the same time the rest of the world has to treat them as their equals. The examples cited above ask us to 'treat them as humans'. Post-Modern era of twenty-first century is associated with multiple cultural identities like cosmopolitan, metropolitan, multicultural, hybrid and so on. He/she has to accommodate with the pan-global and pan-local culture but that doesn't mean that indigenous cultures are on the verge of decay. The so called fourth world is struggling hard for coming in the main flow but at the same time they want to preserve their own culture too. The fourth world tribal belt intends to integrate on global scale and desires to confront with 'son-of-the-soil' issue and 'self-identification' on the local indigenous level. The silence has already been broken through their voices raised in their literature but they need to get noticed and canonized. It's high time now to come out of the psyche of commodification and capitalism through Coca-colonization and McDonnaldization of the so called first world strategy. The world can be a better place to live if all the discriminations, favouritism, biases, unfairness, and inequalities are confronted and human concern would stand above all. Let us accept the fact that Utopian world is a myth but dystopian world can be a better place if we respect and treat one-another as our equals. Robindranath Tagore's world depicted in his poem 'Where the Mind is without Fear' would no longer remain a myth then.

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