
THE DISINTEGRATION OF TRIBAL LIFE IN GOPINATH MOHANTY'S THE ANCESTOR

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Abstract:

The present paper highlights the disintegration of Tribal life in Gopinath Mohanty's *The Ancestor* (Dadi Budha), his first novel on tribals concerning impact of colonial modernity on tribal culture and society. It is a novel about the lives, customs, beliefs and rituals of the tribal communities and about the outer intervention that causes disintegration of tribal society and culture disrupting and affecting tribal harmony in adverse ways. The novel sets in the Lulla village that tells the poignant story of struggle for survival of paraja tribe, facing decadence with the invasion of intruders. The ideologies of modern civilization are personified in the character of Santosh Kumari who seduces Thenga Jani, a representative of tribals. Tenga, under the influence of various forces of modernity, breaks away the tribal norms, devaluing his age-old tradition and cultural beliefs. And the negative consequences of this act also play out in the lives of the tribals. The tribal life is deeply rooted in indigenous eco-ethics, tradition and beliefs which exist in antipathy to modernity. Though, an impact of modernity has influenced their culture to some extent but the key tenets of their tradition remain unaffected.

Key Words: Tribal, Disintegration, Ancestor, Colonial, Modernity, Intervention, Customs Tradition.

Introduction:

Gopinath Mohanty is the first writer in India to represent the voices of the tribals and their realistic picture of tribal life and the happenings in Lulla village. All is well with the Lulla inhabitants. However, a turning point comes when Thenga Jani flees with a Christian girl, Santosh Kumari, violating the eternal ancestral spirit in the form of God, residing in a date-palm tree. It is the spirit of their ancestors that they worship as their supreme God. Dadi Budha is the creator and destroyer. The world operates under his command. He stands as a silent witness to the joys and sorrows of tribal people "Dadi Budha was a benign deity. He expressed his anger until he was provoked. He was the eternal ancestor. Everything was his creation, his play. Anyone could speak on his behalf, for he was mute" (Mohanty 8)

Dadi Budha (1944), Mohanty's first tribal novel, explores similar themes through the lens of ancestral worship and community decline. Set in a forested village, it portrays the Kandha tribe's spiritual connection to nature, drawing parallels to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* in its depiction of cultural collapse. *Amrutara Santana* (1949), for which Mohanty won the Sahitya Akademi Award, delves into the Kondh tribe's matrilineal society and rituals, blending realism with mythological elements.

Gopinath Mohanty's *Dadi Budha* (1944), his pioneering foray into the world of tribal fiction, establishes a thematic blueprint that would be refined in his later masterpiece, *Paraja*. Set within the forested village of the Kandha tribe, the novel is far more than a simple anthropological portrait; it is a profound meditation on the crisis of indigenous cosmology in the face of encroaching colonial modernity. While it shares with *Paraja* the overarching narrative of cultural collapse, *Dadi Budha* distinguishes itself by framing this disintegration primarily through the lens of "spiritual and ancestral rupture". The novel's central conflict is not first economic or legal, but cosmological—a battle for the soul of a community whose identity is inextricably woven into a sacred landscape.

The foundational theme of *Dadi Budha* is the holistic, animistic worldview of the Kandha tribe. Mohanty meticulously constructs a universe where the human, natural, and spiritual realms are in constant, reciprocal dialogue. The village deity, the clan spirits, and the ancestral presence of figures like Dadi Budha himself are not metaphorical constructs but active, immanent forces governing daily life. The forest is not merely a resource base but a “sacred grove”, a living temple where every stream, stone, and sal tree possesses a numinous quality. Rituals of hunting, sowing, and harvesting are acts of communion and negotiation with these forces. This theme establishes what anthropologist Philippe Descola might term a system of “analogic” relations, where “continuity exists between the interiority of humans and non-humans” (Descola 129). The tribe’s identity, morality, and social cohesion derive from this integrated sacred ecology. The character of Dadi Budha—the revered, almost mythical elder—embodies this connection, serving as a living repository of tribal lore, ritual protocol, and ecological wisdom. His authority is sacerdotal, rooted in his ability to interpret the will of the ancestors and the forest.

The novel’s central drama arises from the gradual but palpable failure of this cosmological system. This theme of “ritual inefficacy” marks the beginning of the cultural collapse. Calamities strike—crop failure, disease, predatory animals—but the traditional sacrifices and propitiations led by Dadi Budha appear to lose their power. The gods seem silent; the ancestors appear distant. This crisis of faith creates a profound existential schism within the community. The younger generation, represented by characters like the ambitious and skeptical Joru, begins to question the old ways. This internal doubt is as devastating as any external threat. Here, Mohanty’s work resonates powerfully with Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*, where the failure of the Oracle and the gods to protect Umuofia from the white man leads to a similar spiritual demoralization. As Achebe writes, “The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one” (Achebe 152).

In *Dadi Budha*, the “white man” is largely an absent presence, but the corrosive forces of change—symbolized by distant administrators, migrant laborers, and new ideas—similarly erode unity from within. The theme illustrates how colonial disruption first manifests as a spiritual breakdown, severing the people’s trust in the system that defines them.

From the spiritual crisis emerges the acute theme of “generational conflict”. Dadi Budha represents the unchanging, cyclical time of tradition, where the past sanctifies the present. Joru and his contemporaries represent an emerging linear time—oriented toward individual ambition, new forms of power, and adaptation to a changing world. This conflict is not merely ideological but structural. The authority of the elder, vested in knowledge of ritual and myth, is challenged by the potential authority of the younger, which might lie in navigating the new systems of law and commerce. Mohanty portrays this divide with tragic nuance. Dadi Budha is not a mere conservative; he is the guardian of a cosmic order. Joru is not simply a rebel; he is a pragmatist seeking agency in a landscape where the old guarantees have evaporated. This tearing of the social fabric mirrors the fate of Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, whose rigid adherence to traditional masculinity and authority becomes tragically obsolete, leaving him isolated. In both novels, the generational clash signifies the impossibility of transmitting a cultural worldview intact when the material and metaphysical grounds of that worldview are being dismantled.

Unlike later novels, *Dadi Budha* presents the forces of modernity as largely spectral and indirect, which makes their impact more insidious. The theme of an ambiguous, encroaching modernity is portrayed through rumors of railway lines cutting through forests, of government “sahibs” conducting surveys, and of plains people with different laws. The forest, once an encompassing womb of security, begins to feel like a shrinking island. This creates a pervasive anxiety—a sense that the world beyond the village is reorganizing itself according to alien principles that will inevitably intrude. The threat is not yet the forest guard or the moneylender in person, but the abstract idea of the state and the market whose shadows loom over the tribal commons. This reflects the early phase of what historian David Hardiman identifies as the colonial “quiet encroachment” on tribal autonomy, where “the ideological and legal framework for later economic exploitation is first laid” (Hardiman 67). The community’s decline is thus propelled by both internal spiritual doubt and this external, atmospheric pressure.

The culmination of these themes is the holistic “cultural collapse which Mohanty portrays primarily as a form of spiritual deracination. The narrative arc leads not just to material poverty but to a state of collective anomie—a loss of the sacred map that told the people who they were and how to live. The likely fate of Dadi Budha—to die a symbolic death as the last true believer—would represent the extinction of a mode of consciousness. This is the core parallel with Achebe’s work: both novels are tragedies of world-ending. In *Umuofia*, the center cannot hold because the cosmology that was the center has been invalidated. In the Kandha village, the center crumbles because it can no longer be sustained from within or defended from without. The title itself, *Dadi Budha* (The Ancient One), becomes an ironic testament to this; the ancestral spirit is now a lonely, anachronistic figure, witnessing the unraveling of the world he embodies. This loss is epistemological and ontological, far deeper than political subjugation.

Finally, a consistent theme is “nature as an active participant” in the human drama. The forest’s health mirrors the tribe’s spiritual health. As faith wanes and community fractures, the relationship with the environment becomes more extractive and less reverent, foreshadowing ecological degradation. The symbiotic balance is broken. In this, Mohanty also presages later environmental critiques, showing how the disintegration of indigenous cultural systems is intrinsically linked to the degradation of their ecosystems. The forest, once a partner, becomes a mere resource to be exploited before outsiders claim it—a final, profound desacralization.

In short, *Dadi Budha* is a seminal work that analytically explores the precondition for the more tangible exploitations depicted in *Paraja*. Its major themes—ancestral cosmology, ritual failure, generational schism, ambiguous modernity, and spiritual collapse—chart the internal dissolution of a world before the external forces complete its destruction. By framing the tragedy through spiritual crisis, Mohanty, like Achebe, identifies the most profound loss inflicted by cultural imperialism: not just of land or autonomy, but of a coherent universe of meaning. The novel stands as a poignant elegy for the sacred web of life, chronicling the moment when the ancestors fall silent, and the path forward disappears into an uncertain and profane darkness.

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