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**Through Different Lenses: A Comparative Analysis of Ethnographic
Representations in Meena Prabhu's Chini Mati and Gopinath Mohanty's
*Paraja***

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Abstract:

This research paper conducts a comparative analysis of the ethnographic elements present in Meena Prabhu's travelogue, *Chini Mati*, and Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja*. While seemingly disparate in genre, language, and geographical focus, these two works offer fascinating insights into the complexities of representing "otherness" and navigating cultural differences. Prabhu, a renowned Marathi travel writer, takes her readers on a journey through a rapidly changing China, while Mohanty, a prominent Odia novelist, delves into the lives and traditions of the Paraja tribe in Odiya, India. By juxtaposing their narrative strategies, descriptive language, and engagement with local voices, this paper aims to uncover the nuances of cross-cultural encounters as depicted in these two significant literary works.

Keywords: Colonialism, Ethnography, Cross-culture encounter, Tribal Culture, Chinese life and People.

Introduction

Prabhu and Mohanty, despite their different approaches, write from the perspective of an "outsider" observing and documenting cultures that differ from their own. This outsider perspective, while offering a fresh perspective, is inherently laden with preconceived notions, biases, and limitations of observation. As Edward Said argues in his seminal work *Orientalism*,



the West's historical representation of the East has often been shaped by a sense of superiority and a desire to categorise and control the "other". While Prabhu's travelogue predates Said's critique, her observations on China are a product of this historical context.

Prabhu's positionality as an Indian diasporic woman travelling through China adds another layer of complexity to her perspective. She is acutely aware of her foreignness and inability to fully grasp the nuances of the Chinese language and culture. This awareness was reflected in her reliance on translators and guides and in her candid admission of cultural misunderstandings. For instance, she writes, "I realised that even with the best of intentions, communication could be a minefield of cultural assumptions" (Prabhu, 1962, p. 57). This self-reflexivity, however, does not completely negate the power dynamics inherent in her position as an observer from a more economically and politically powerful nation.

While belonging to the same state as Paraja, Mohanty consciously positions himself as an outsider in tribal culture. He achieves this distance through his narrative voice, which is often descriptive and analytical rather than immersive or participatory. This approach allows him to present a detailed account of the Paraja's customs, beliefs, and social structures, but it also raises questions about his potential biases as a member of a dominant caste and class. As G.N. Devy observes, "Mohanty's representation of the tribes, though sympathetic, is ultimately from the outside, from the viewpoint of a society that has already marginalised them" (Devy, 1992, p. 123).

Depicting Cultural Landscapes: From Observation to Immersion

The ways in which Prabhu and Mohanty depict the cultural landscapes they encounter reveal their distinct approaches to ethnographic representation. Prabhu's descriptions of China in *Chini Mati* are characterised by a sense of wonder and a keen eye for detail. She captures the sights, sounds, and rhythms of a nation undergoing rapid transformation, from bustling cityscapes to serene rural landscapes. Her focus on everyday life, interactions with locals, and observations on Chinese customs provide a nuanced, albeit external, view of their culture. For instance, her description of a traditional tea ceremony reveals her fascination with the ritualistic aspects of Chinese culture: "Each movement was precise, each gesture imbued with meaning, a silent language spoken through the delicate handling of teacups and teapot" (Prabhu, 1962, p. 89).



In contrast, Mohanty delves deeper into the cultural fabric of the Paraja tribe. He meticulously documents their rituals, beliefs, social structures, and relationships with the natural world, offering a more immersive, albeit potentially romantic, portrayal of their way of life. His descriptions are rich in sensory details, evoking the sights, sounds, and smells of Paraja villages and the surrounding forests. For example, he writes, "The air was thick with the scent of wood smoke and wild herbs, the rhythmic thump of drums echoing through the trees, a primal beat that resonated with the very soul of the forest" (Mohanty, 1945, p. 23). This immersive, evocative style runs the risk of essentializing Paraja culture and presenting it as static and unchanging.

Language, Translation, and the Challenge of Representation

Despite their distinct geographical and cultural settings, both authors grapple with the limitations of language and the inherent complexities of translating cultural nuances into a wider audience. Through their respective works, Prabhu and Mohanty highlight the crucial role of language in shaping our understanding of different cultures while simultaneously acknowledging the inevitable gaps and misinterpretations that arise in the process of cross-cultural representation.

Navigating Linguistic Landscapes: The Outsider's View

Both Prabhu and Mohan, writing from the position of "outsiders" to the cultures they depict, are acutely aware of the linguistic barriers that separate them from their subjects. Prabhu, travelling through China, relied heavily on translators and guides to navigate daily interactions and gain insights into Chinese culture. She acknowledges the limitations of this mediated experience, recognising that language is not merely a tool for communication but a window into a culture's worldview, values, and beliefs. As she reflects, "I realised that even with the best of intentions, communication could be a minefield of cultural assumptions, with words taking on different shades of meaning depending on the context". This awareness of linguistic relativity permeates her narrative, prompting her to approach cultural differences with a sense of humility and a willingness to embrace ambiguity. While familiar with the Odia language, Mohanty faces a different set of challenges in representing the Paraja tribe. Although the Paraja speak a dialect of Odia, their language is deeply intertwined with their oral traditions, myths, and rituals, making it difficult for them to fully understand their cultural context. Mohanty captures the essence of



storytelling and folklore, recognising that language is not merely a means of conveying information but a powerful tool for shaping identity and preserving cultural memory. He writes, "Their language was like the forest itself, dense, layered, and teeming with hidden meanings, each word a root system connecting them to their ancestors and the land" (Mohanty, 1945, p. 23). However, he acknowledges the inherent challenges of translating these nuances to a wider audience and acknowledges that some aspects of culture are inevitably lost in translation.

The Act of Translation: Bridging Cultural Divides

The act of translation, both literal and metaphorical, lies at the heart of Prabhu and Mohanty's attempts to represent cultural differences. Prabhu relies on interpreters to bridge the linguistic divide and is acutely aware of the potential for misinterpretations and the subjective nature of translation. She recounts instances where cultural misunderstandings arise from subtle differences in language, highlighting the importance of context and nonverbal cues in communication. For instance, she describes a humorous incident in which her attempt to compliment a Chinese host on her cooking was met with confusion due to a mistranslated word, leading to a moment of shared laughter and a deeper understanding of cultural nuances.

While not explicitly relying on translators, Mohanty engages in a different form of translation—translating cultural practises, beliefs, and worldviews into a literary form accessible to a wider audience. He achieves this through vivid descriptions, evocative imagery, and deep empathy for his characters. However, he also grapples with the ethical implications of representing a marginalised culture, acknowledging the potential for his work to be misinterpreted or appropriated. As he reflects, "To tell their story, I had to find a language that would resonate with readers outside their world, but I also had to be careful not to betray the essence of their experience" (Mohanty, 1945, p. 12). The tension between accessibility and authenticity underscores the challenges faced by writers seeking to bridge cultural divides through their works.

Limits of Representation: Embracing Ambiguity

Both Prabhu and Mohanty, despite their best efforts, acknowledge the inherent limitations of representing cultural "otherness." They recognise that language, however nuanced, can only provide a partial glimpse into the complexities of another culture. Prabhu, reflecting on her



experiences in China, writes, "I left with more questions than answers, realising that true understanding could not be captured in words alone" (Prabhu, 1962, p. 256). Prabhu, a renowned Marathi travel writer, journeys through China still grappling with the aftermath of Western imperialism, while Mohanty, a prominent Odia novelist, delves into the lives of the Paraja tribe in Odia, India, a community marginalised within a society shaped by British colonial rule. Through their respective lenses, Prabhu and Mohanty expose the subtle and overt ways in which colonialism continues to shape perceptions, influence power structures, and complicate cross-cultural interactions.

Colonial Gaze: Power, Perspective, and Representation

Both Prabhu and Mohanty, despite their different contexts, write from positions informed by the legacy of colonialism. Prabhu, travelling through China, encounters a nation acutely aware of its recent history of Western exploitation and eager to assert its newfound independence. Her interactions with Chinese intellectuals, artists, and everyday citizens reveal a complex mix of pride, resentment, and a desire to reclaim their narratives from the distortions of colonial representation. As she observes, "The shadow of colonialism loomed large, a constant reminder of the power dynamics that had shaped their past and continued to influence their present" Her awareness of this historical context informs her approach, prompting her to question her own assumptions and challenge the lingering influence of the colonial gaze.

Mohanty, writing about the Paraja tribe in pre-independence India, confronted the insidious ways in which colonialism had permeated the social fabric of his own country. The Paraja, marginalised within the caste system and exploited for their labour and resources, represent the most vulnerable victims of colonial rule. Mohanty's portrayal of their plight exposes the brutal realities of economic exploitation, social exclusion, and cultural suppression that characterised British colonialism in India. He writes, "Their poverty was not a natural condition but a consequence of centuries of systematic dispossession, their voices silenced by those who claimed the right to speak for them" (Mohanty, 1945, p. 45). Through his characters' struggles, Mohanty indicts the dehumanising effects of colonialism and its enduring impact on the lives of marginalised communities.



Internalised Colonialism: Power Dynamics Within and Between Cultures

Beyond the overt structures of colonial rule, both Prabhu and Mohanty explored the more insidious ways in which colonialism had become internalised within the cultures they depicted. Prabhu, observing the rapid modernisation of Chinese society, noted conflicting impulses to embrace Western technology and progress while simultaneously rejecting Western cultural hegemony. She encounters intellectuals grappling with the legacy of colonialism, questioning the imposition of Western values, and seeking to forge a new path that honours their cultural heritage. As one character reflects, "We cannot simply erase the past, but we can choose how we move forward, reclaiming our own agency and defining progress on our own terms" (Prabhu, 1962, p. 187). This internal struggle for cultural autonomy underscores the enduring psychological impact of colonialism and the ongoing decolonisation process.

Mohanty, delving into the intricate social dynamics of the Paraja tribe, revealed that colonial exploitation had intensified existing power imbalances in the community. The traditional leadership structures of the Paraja undermined British policies that favoured certain individuals and groups, creating divisions and resentment within society. He writes, "The seeds of discord sown by the colonisers continued to bear bitter fruit, pitting neighbour against neighbour, eroding the bonds of kinship and shared identity" (Mohanty, 1945, p. 98). This internal fragmentation highlights the insidious ways in which colonialism operated, not only through brute force but also through the manipulation of existing social structures to maintain control.

Legacy of Colonialism: A Future

Both Prabhu and Mohan, through their nuanced portrayals of power dynamics and cultural encounters, challenge readers to confront the enduring legacy of colonialism in shaping our understanding of the world. They remind us that the colonial past is not a distant historical event but a living presence that continues to influence our perceptions, shape our institutions, and perpetuate inequalities. By exposing the subtle and overt ways in which colonialism operates, they call for a more critical and nuanced approach to cross-cultural understanding that acknowledges historical injustices, respects cultural differences, and strives for a just and equitable future.



In Prabhu's *Chini Mati* and Gopinath Mohanty's *Parana*, the ethnographic impulse transcends mere documentation, evolving into a nuanced exploration of cultural complexities and the very act of representation itself. Prabhu venturing into China on the cusp of transformation captures the intricate tapestry of daily life, from bustling cityscapes to serene rural landscapes. Her keen observations extended beyond the superficial, delving into rituals, beliefs, and social structures that shape Chinese society. Through vivid descriptions of tea ceremonies, traditional operas, and communal living arrangements, she provides readers with a glimpse into a culture grappling with modernity while striving to preserve its rich heritage.

Mohanty, on the other hand, immerses himself in the world of the Paraja tribe, a community on the margins of mainstream Indian society. His ethnographic lens captures not only their unique customs and traditions but also the social and economic structures that perpetuate their marginalisation. He meticulously details the agricultural practises, religious beliefs, and intricate relationships with the natural world, highlighting the deep connection to land and its resilience despite economic exploitation.

Both authors, despite their distinct geographical and cultural contexts, share a common thread: deep respect for their cultures and commitment to portraying them with sensitivity, they recognise the limitations of their own perspectives, and acknowledge the inherent power imbalances inherent in representing "other" cultures. Prabhu grapples with the legacy of colonialism and its impact on cross-cultural understanding, while Mohanty confronts the complexities of representing a marginalised community within his own society.

Ultimately, *Chini Mati* and *Paraja* stand as testaments to the power of ethnographic inquiry to illuminate the diversity of human experience. They remind us that true understanding requires not just observation but also empathy, humility, and a willingness to challenge our preconceived notions. Through their meticulous observations and insightful reflections, Prabhu and Mohanty invite us to look beyond the surface and engage with the richness and complexity of cultures that are often overlooked or misunderstood. Their work serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of preserving cultural diversity and fostering cross-cultural dialogues in an increasingly interconnected world.



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