

**Primitive Accumulation Revisited: A Silvia Federici Perspective on Land,  
Labour and Tribal Survival in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja***

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**Abstract:** Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* is widely accepted as a powerful narrative of socio-economic marginalization of the tribal communities of Odisha. This paper is a re-reading of the novel through Silvia Federici's concept of primitive accumulation. The paper argues that the exploitation of the novel is not only an economic deprivation but also an organized destruction of communal life, indigenous knowledge and traditional labour relations. Federici argues that primitive accumulation is an ongoing process of capitalist enclosure in which common resources are taken, autonomous communities become dependent workers, and social relations are reconfigured for the needs of the capital (Federici 11-25). The study, through close textual analysis and left materialist criticism, examines how the processes of land alienation, debt bondage, forced labour and state-backed power structures progressively undermine the economic independence and cultural identity of the Paraja community. The paper also discusses the intrinsic relationship between land and labour being the twin pillars of tribal life and how dispossession of land creates a vulnerable labour force that is open to exploitation. The paper engages with Federici's larger critique of capitalist expansion to uncover the intersections of dispossession, social reproduction and collective survival in the tribal world, unlike the more conventional Marxist readings which focus primarily on class conflict. It contends that *Paraja* anticipates current debates about indigenous displacement, resource privatization, and neoliberal development, thereby establishing its ongoing relevance to contemporary discussions of environmental justice and social inequality. In conversation with Mohanty's novel, this paper brings Federici's theoretical framework, providing a new interdisciplinary view which enhances Left literary criticism and expands the critical discourse on Indian tribal literature.

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**Keywords:** Primitive Accumulation, Left Materialism, Tribal Studies, Land Alienation, Labour Exploitation, Indigenous Communities, Capitalism, Social Reproduction, Marxist Literary Criticism.

**Introduction:** Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1991) is one of the most distinguished voices of modern Indian literature, famous for his sensitive portrayal of the lives, cultures and struggles of the tribal communities of Odisha. Mohanty, who has written most of her prolific fiction in Odia, foregrounds marginalized groups and exposes the socio-economic inequalities that are integral to colonial and postcolonial India. He received many prestigious awards for his literary excellence such as Sahitya Akademi Award for Amrutara Santana in 1955, Jnanpith Award in 1973 and Padma Bhushan in 1981. One of his most important works, *Paraja*, is a realistic portrait of the gradual dispossession and exploitation of an indigenous community.

For my study, I am using the notion of primitive accumulation, a re-imagining of Marx's theory that capital accumulation is not the result of a single historical period but of the ongoing expropriation of land, labour and communal resources, by Silvia Federici, as a lens through which to examine *Paraja* (Federici 11-25). The application of Federici's framework to *Paraja* reveals the systematic process of debt and alienation of land and forced labor practices that transform the community of *Paraja* from self-sufficient cultivators to an exploited workforce.

This issue is important because it speaks to ongoing debates about indigenous land rights, environmental justice, and capitalistic development. Previous studies have focused mainly on class conflict, tribal identity or postcolonial resistance; This paper pushes to the fore the interconnected processes of dispossession, labour exploitation and community survival as understood through the lens of contemporary Left theory. The study offers a new perspective on *Paraja* by initiating a dialogue between Mohanty's literary vision and Federici's political thinking, demonstrating the novel's relevance to today's debates on social justice, economic inequality and indigenous resistance.

The concept of primitive accumulation, elaborated by Karl Marx, denotes the historical process by which producers were separated from their means of production and the conditions were established for capitalist development (Marx 873). Silvia Federici extends this formulation arguing that primitive accumulation is not only the origin of capitalism but a recurrent mechanism of capitalist reproduction. She argues that "primitive accumulation... was not simply an accumulation and concentration of exploitable workers and capital. It was also a question of a meeting of differences and divisions within the working class" (Federici

63). Federici extends Marx's economic analysis by emphasizing dispossession, social reproduction and structural inequalities, and the continued expropriation of communities and labour under contemporary capitalism.

David Harvey elaborates on this argument in the form of the "accumulation by dispossession". He argues that the privatization, commodification and enclosure of common resources are still central features of neoliberal capitalism (Harvey 145). These theoretical interventions show that primitive accumulation is not a historical fact of the past, but an ongoing strategy of capitalist expansion. Read along with Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, these views reveal how the capitalist logic of exploitation is perpetuated through the dispossession of tribal communities, bondage of debt and erosion of communal ownership. Primitive accumulation is thus a useful analytical tool to understand the novel's representation of land, labour and tribal survival.

Left materialism considers literature from the point of view of the material conditions which rule social life, with attention to class relations, labour and the unequal distribution of economic power. Instead of seeing inequality as an individual experience, it sees exploitation as the product of material structures that have been produced historically. Terry Eagleton contends that "Marxist criticism is not just a 'sociology of literature', concerned with the way in which novels are published and whether they refer to the working class. it seeks to explain the literary work more fully" (Eagleton 3). This view allows for a more complex reading of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* where the economic insecurity of the tribal community is not a consequence of individual failure but the result of systems of land alienation, debt and coercive labour.

This is a materialist approach that Silvia Federici develops, arguing that capitalist expansion relies on the constant dispossession of communities and their means of subsistence, producing new kinds of exploitable labour (Federici 11-15). Through this theoretical lens, *Paraja* represents tribal life as an integral part of the material access to land and forests. The slow erosion of common possession converts self-sufficient cultivators to dependent labourers, demonstrating how economic power reorganises social relations and cultural identity (Mohanty). Therefore, the novel implies that tribal survival is a material struggle against structures that turn common resources into tools of capitalist accumulation. Left materialism is a useful lens for understanding Mohanty's critique of social inequality.

Tribal Studies examines indigenous peoples in terms of their specific relationships to land, culture and collective identity, and challenges representations which portray them as helpless victims of history. As Virginius Xaxa states, tribal societies are not to be understood as isolated cultural entities but as part of "the larger processes of social, economic and

political change" (Xaxa 8). This perspective is especially relevant to Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*, where the Parajas' livelihood and identity is based on their close relationship with the forest and their ancestral land. As external forces of debt, administration and exploitation penetrate into the life of the tribe, the community begins to lose its autonomy and customary practices (Mohanty). Walter Fernandes points out, too, that the displacement of indigenous peoples not only involves economic deprivation but also the loss of cultural heritage and community life (Fernandes 204). In *Tribal Studies*, *Paraja* foregrounds indigenous resilience and lays bare the structural inequalities that imperil tribal survival under expanding capitalist and state power.

One of the main mechanisms of primitive accumulation is the alienation of the land, which separates the indigenous communities from their traditional subsistence base. As Silvia Federici has argued, capitalism expands by "the expropriation of the means of reproduction from the workers," transforming independent communities into a dependent labour force (Federici 75). This process is well reflected in Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* where the Paraja tribe gradually loses its control over its ancestral land through indebtedness, coercive authority and unequal legal structures (Mohanty). This ongoing process is also described by David Harvey as "accumulation by dispossession," which emphasizes the fact that privatization and commodification of common resources are still core features of modern capitalism (Harvey 149). In reading through these theoretical perspectives, *Paraja* argues that land is not just an economic asset but the basis of tribal identity, social cohesion and cultural continuity. Thus, the novel's land alienation symbolizes not only material deprivation but also the systematic erosion of indigenous autonomy.

*Paraja* labour exploitation is a reflection of the process of transforming independent tribal cultivators into a dependent labour force through debt and coercion. Silvia Federici claims that capitalism perpetuates itself through the creation of "a class of individuals who have nothing to sell but their labour-power" (Federici 65). This we find in Mohanty's presentation of the gradual erosion of economic autonomy of the *Paraja* family through the replacement of subsistence agriculture with compulsory labour in repressive social and economic conditions (Mohanty). Similarly, Karl Marx contends that capitalism causes alienation of labour because "the worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces" (Marx 326). Combined, these theoretical perspectives show that labour in *Paraja* is not a voluntary economic activity, but a result of dispossession and unequal power relations. Thus, Mohanty exposes the exploitation of labour as a form of primitive accumulation that robs the tribal communities of material independence and human dignity.

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Indigenous peoples are defined by collective relationships to land, ecological knowledge and cultural continuity. James C. Scott points out that many indigenous societies have preserved their autonomy by resisting incorporation into centralized systems of political and economic control, and that they have “lived beyond the reach of the state” (Scott ix). This understanding explains Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*. The social structure, subsistence economy, and communal customs of the *Paraja* tribe are inextricably tied to their ancestral terrain (Mohanty). But money-lenders, landlords and state officials encroach and gradually break up this indigenous way of life. Similarly, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, writes that colonial institutions have tended to “deny the validity for indigenous peoples of their own knowledge” (Smith 1). In reading through this framework, *Paraja* does not present indigenous communities as victims of exploitation but as custodians of collective memory whose struggle for survival also becomes a struggle to preserve identity, dignity and cultural sovereignty.

In Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*, capitalism is a system which re-frames tribal life, making collective ownership into economic subservience. Capitalism is not simply described as a mode of production in the novel, but its ability to penetrate indigenous social relations through debt, exploitation of labour and dispossession of land is exposed (Mohanty). David Harvey argues that “capitalism survives through a series of spatial fixes and accumulation by dispossession” (149), emphasizing that the expansion of capital depends upon appropriating common resources and subordinating marginalized communities. Ellen Meiksins Wood also notes that capitalism is marked by its “systematic reliance on the market for the most basic conditions of life” (7). These theoretical insights throw light on the experiences of the *Paraja* tribe whose subsistence economy is progressively superseded by market-oriented relations dominated by landlords, money-lenders and colonial administration. The transformation that follows strips the community of its economic autonomy, forcing it to trade its labour under coercive conditions. *Paraja* focuses on these views, claiming that capitalism does not only exploit economically, but also changes cultural values, social institutions and human relations. In this sense, Mohanty’s narrative prefigures contemporary criticisms of the expansion of capitalism by exposing the ways in which the commodification of land and labour imperils the existence of indigenous communities and undermines their collective identity.

Silvia Federici theory of social reproduction builds on Marxist thought and emphasizes the fact that capitalism depends on the reproduction of labour power as well as commodities, through family, community and everyday life. She contends that “capitalism must justify and mystify the contradictions built into its social relations” (Federici 15). In

*Paraja*, the disruption to tribal life is not merely in terms of economic dispossession, but in terms of disruption of communal relations, customary practices and the intergenerational transmission of indigenous knowledge (Mohanty). The loss of land and livelihood erodes the social fabric that sustains the *Paraja* community, making it increasingly difficult to survive under exploitative conditions. Nancy Fraser also argues that capitalism produces “crises of care” again and again, so that the very institutions that sustain human life are also the ones capitalism relies on for its own reproduction (Fraser 30). *Paraja*, reading through the lenses of Federici and Fraser, reveals the exploitation of the tribal is inseparable from the erosion of social reproduction. Mohanty’s narrative shows how the dispossession of indigenous communities not only affects economic independence but kinship, cultural memory and collective resilience. The novel therefore depicts social reproduction as an essential site of resistance to the pernicious logic of capitalist expansion.

Marxist literary criticism sees literature as a product of the material and ideological forces that underlie social relations. It looks at the impact on narrative and character of class struggle, labour and economic structures, rather than treating literary texts as autonomous aesthetic objects. Marxist criticism is not simply a “sociology of literature,” as Terry Eagleton points out; rather, its goal is to “explain the literary work more fully” (3). Such a critical position provides a productive lens to read Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja*, where the exploitation of the tribal community is rooted in the unequal ownership of land, labour and economic resources (Mohanty). Georg Lukács similarly argues that realism reveals the “totality” of social relations by exposing the historical forces that shape individual lives (Lukács 38). This is what Mohanty’s novel does, being a part of the realist tradition, presenting tribal dispossession not as an isolated tragedy but as a consequence of the larger socio-economic structures. In Marxist literary criticism, the figure of the *paraja* is a potent critique of capitalist domination. It demonstrates how class exploitation and material deprivation systematically transform indigenous life. Thus the novel transforms tribal suffering into a more universal meditation on inequality, power, and resistance, and reasserts the continuing importance of Marxist critique for interpreting postcolonial tribal narratives.

**Conclusion:** Gopinath Mohanty’s *Paraja* is a powerful literary critique of the socio-economic forces that shape the lives of indigenous communities. Silvia Federici’s theory of primitive accumulation provides a lens to read the novel as an allegory of tribal dispossession, not as a singular moment in history, but as a continuing process at the heart of capitalism’s expansion. Federici’s rereading of Marx shows that primitive accumulation is not only about the seizure of land but also about a systematic restructuring of labour, social reproduction and communal life (Federici 11–15). Read alongside *Paraja*, this theoretical

framework demonstrates how debt, land alienation and forced labour make self-sufficient tribal cultivators' dependent workers, and damage not just economic autonomy but cultural identity.

The study also demonstrates that Mohanty's narrative exceeds the conventional Marxist analysis of class conflict by foregrounding the interdependence of land, labour, indigenous knowledge and collective survival. The close relation of the *Paraja* community with the forests and ancestral land is a holistic lifestyle that is slowly destroyed by the combined forces of colonial administration, moneylending and capitalist exploitation (Mohanty). So, the novel shows the tribal resistance as not a formal political revolution but a constant fight to keep dignity, memory and cultural continuity against oppressive material conditions.

In addition, the combination of Left materialism, Tribal Studies, Social Reproduction, and Marxist literary criticism expands the interpretative possibilities of *Paraja*. David Harvey, Raymond Williams, Terry Eagleton, Nancy Fraser, James C. Scott and other contemporary scholars have demonstrated in their theoretical contributions, the continued dependence of capitalist development on the dispossession of marginalized groups and the commodification of land and labour. Mohanty's literary imagination is ahead of these contemporary debates and makes *Paraja* remarkably relevant to the current issues of indigenous rights, environmental justice and neoliberal development.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that *Paraja* is not merely a regional tribal novel but a powerful intervention into global conversations about capitalism, inequality and social justice. The paper provides a new interdisciplinary perspective to Indian literary studies by juxtaposing Mohanty's narrative with Silvia Federici's notion of primitive accumulation and brings out the continuing relevance of Left literary criticism to understand the historical and contemporary realities of indigenous communities.

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