

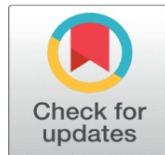
# ECHOES IN THE MATRIX: LOCATING THE PARAJA VOICE AT THE NEXUS OF MOHANTY'S TEXT, TRIBAL TONGUE, AND A DISINTEGRATING TRIBE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper employs the postcolonial metaphor of "the Matrix" to locate the voice of the Paraja, an indigenous tribe from Odisha, India. This "Matrix" represents the inescapable system of colonial and post-colonial law, capital, and state power that has overwritten the tribe's reality. The Paraja voice, it is argued, is not a clear cry of resistance but a series of faint "echoes" resonating from three distinct but interconnected sources: the profound literary testimony of Gopinath Mohanty's 1945 novel, *Paraja*; the fading cadence of the endangered Parji tribal tongue; and the scarred corporeal reality of the disintegrating tribe itself. Through an interdisciplinary analysis that weaves together literary criticism, linguistics, and anthropology, this paper traces these echoes to construct a composite portrait of a people trapped in a system they cannot comprehend. The study reveals how the loss of land, language, and culture are not separate tragedies but integrated functions of a single, all-consuming machine, positioning the Paraja's story as a universal allegory for the plight of indigenous communities confronting a globalized, materialistic civilization.

**Keywords:** Paraja Tribe, Postcolonialism, Indigenous Identity, Gopinath Mohanty, Cultural Displacement, Colonial and Postcolonial Systems

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the film *The Matrix*, reality as perceived by most of humanity is a sophisticated illusion, a computer-generated dream world designed to control and exploit them. This "prison for the mind" turns human beings into a source of energy, batteries powering the very system that contains them. Postcolonial thinkers have adopted this powerful allegory to describe the "colonial matrix of power"—a complex, all-encompassing web of economic, political, and cultural systems that constitutes the darker, often invisible, side of Western modernity. This is not a work of science fiction but a historical and ongoing reality for indigenous peoples across the globe. It is a system of control whose constructs are rendered so totalizing as to be ineluctable, its logic so pervasive that it becomes the only conceivable reality.

The Paraja tribe of Odisha, India, are inhabitants of such a Matrix. Gopinath Mohanty conveys a nostalgic portrayal of pre-colonial tribal autonomy when he writes, "When there was no poison in the fresh air ... the earth belonged to the Jhodia, and to nobody else." (Mohanty, *Paraja*, p. 94) Like the film's unwitting "coppertops", they have become the human fuel for a system that benefits others—the moneylenders (sahukars), the state officials, and the abstract forces of "development" and "progress". They live and die by rules they did not create and cannot comprehend, their lives powering a society that has no place for them except as a resource to be consumed.

To seek out the "Paraja voice" within this context is to misunderstand the nature of their confinement. The truly oppressed, the subaltern, often cannot speak in a language the dominant world recognizes. Their voice is not a clear, articulate cry of resistance but a series of fragmented "echoes"—the residual sounds of a world being systematically erased. Postcolonial literature has long served as a platform to amplify these once-silenced stories, to make audible the narratives of those on the margins. This paper is an act of listening for those echoes. It is an attempt to locate the Paraja voice not as a single sound, but as a haunting resonance triangulation from three critical sources: the literary echo captured in Gopinath Mohanty's monumental novel, the linguistic echo of a fading tribal tongue, and the corporeal echo of the scars borne by a disintegrating tribe. By assembling these fragments, this paper seeks to understand the full measure of what has been lost when an entire people are plugged into a machine they can neither fight nor escape.

To understand the Paraja tragedy, one must begin with its most powerful testimony: Gopinath Mohanty's 1945 novel, *Paraja*. Mohanty was not merely an author; he was a crucial witness. His role as a government administrator posted in the tribal district of Koraput afforded him an intimate, firsthand knowledge of the Paraja people that few outsiders could ever achieve. His empathy was so profound that local landowners and moneylenders once petitioned the government, complaining that Mohanty "is always fond of hill-men and behaves like hill-men himself". He "suffered and exulted with Sukru Jani and his tribe", lending his work a "surging power" and an authenticity that elevates it far beyond a simple sociological document. In writing *Paraja*, Mohanty undertook a deliberate act of giving voice to the voiceless, fulfilling one of the core missions of postcolonial literature: to articulate the worlds of those who have been silenced.

The novel's plot meticulously charts a family's forced assimilation into the oppressive Matrix. It begins in what can be understood as the Paraja's "real world", a reality governed by the rhythms of nature and the bonds of community. The patriarch, Sukru Jani, is a contented man, his dreams rooted in the soil he cultivates and the future he imagines for his

children—prosperous marriages, more land, a life of self-sufficiency. This world is whole, its values clear. The intrusion comes swiftly and irrevocably. The lecherous Forest Guard and the merciless sahukar, Ramachandra Bisoi, are not simply individual villains; they are "agents" of the system, enforcing its alien logic. A false accusation of felling trees illegally results in a fine Sukru cannot pay. This single event is the portal through which the family is pulled into the Matrix. To pay the fine, Sukru must take a loan from the sahukar, and this debt becomes the chain that binds him. He and his sons are forced into *goti*, or bonded labor, becoming slaves on the moneylender's land. They are plugged into a "vicious web of debt", their labor harvested to enrich the very system that enslaves them.

The narrative structure of the novel mirrors this process of ontological replacement. Sukru Jani's world, governed by oral traditions and communal bonds, is systematically overwritten by an alien and hostile program. The fine from the Forest Guard is the moment of forced entry. Once he is indebted to the sahukar, his life is no longer his own; he becomes a power source, working endlessly for a freedom that is forever simulated, never real. His attempt to seek justice in court represents the final confirmation of his entrapment. He finds himself in a "nightmare world" governed by an incomprehensible code—the law—where his own reality and sense of justice are rendered invalid. The tragedy is not merely that the Paraja are exploited, but that their entire way of being and knowing is erased and replaced by the system's logic.

At the heart of this tragedy is the loss of land. For the Paraja, land is not a commodity to be bought and sold. It is a "living, breathing, and thinking being", the sacred, ancestral source of their spiritual, cultural, and physical sustenance. Mohanty masterfully conveys that the alienation from this land is not an economic setback but a form of soul-death. It is the severing of the tribe from its own identity, a "cosmic tragedy of blighted happiness and shattered dreams".

The novel's devastating climax—the murder of the sahukar—is the ultimate testament to the Matrix's totalizing power. This act of violence is not a triumphant rebellion. It is a desperate, self-annihilating explosion of contained suffering, a "fire that feeds on itself" until it can no longer be contained. Sukru Jani and his sons know they have committed a crime within the new system's rules. They do not flee; they surrender to the police, acknowledging their

final and complete absorption into the machine. There is no escape, no unplugging. The literary echo that Mohanty captures is one of profound and inescapable sorrow, the sound of a world being crushed.

If a culture's reality is encoded in its language, then the erasure of that language is the erasure of the world it describes. Language is the vessel through which we pass down "traditional knowledge and skills", the very foundation of identity. The native tongue of the Paraja is Parji (also known as Duruwa), a Central Dravidian language that carries the unique cadence and worldview of the tribe. This voice, however, is fading. Parji is officially classified as an endangered language. Its decline is not a natural linguistic evolution but a direct consequence of the same systemic pressures of assimilation and marginalization that Mohanty depicts in his novel.

The central conflict in *Paraja* can be understood as a fundamental clash of linguistic codes. The Paraja exist within an oral culture. Their laws are customary, their history is embedded in song and dance, and their agreements are sanctified by the spoken word and mutual trust. The Matrix, in contrast, operates on a written, legalistic code. For the illiterate tribe, the "magic potency of the written word" on ledgers, receipts, and court documents is an incomprehensible and terrifying weapon. The *sahukar's* power lies in his literacy; his ability to manipulate his account books, to literally rewrite the terms of Sukru Jani's debt, is what seals the family's fate. Sukru's inability to "read the code" is the direct mechanism of his destruction. He is trapped by a language he cannot speak.

This process of linguistic replacement is an active, if often implicit, function of the Matrix.

The system of state and market forces promotes a dominant-language reality—in this case, Odia, Hindi, or English—for administrative ease and economic efficiency. This creates a socioeconomic ecology where speakers of minority languages like Parji are forced to abandon their mother tongue to survive. The loss of language is thus not a passive side effect of modernization; it is a tool of control. By erasing a language, the system erases the alternative reality it represents, making its own constructs the only conceivable world. It is the most insidious form of power, as it makes the prisoners forget they ever knew a different language of freedom.

While general frameworks for indigenous language revitalization exist—proposing

immersion schools, community-driven projects, and the creation of educational materials—a search for specific, well-funded programs for the Parji language reveals a telling silence. This absence is itself a powerful echo, a testament to the systemic neglect that allows a unique human voice to fade into static. The linguistic echo of the Paraja is the sound of this silence, the ghost of a vocabulary that once gave name to a world of hills, streams, spirits, and a freedom now lost.

The literary and linguistic echoes find their most painful resonance in the material reality of the Paraja people—in the disintegration of their social body and the psychological scars borne by its members. To comprehend the depth of this loss, one must first appreciate the wholeness that was shattered. Traditional Paraja society was a rich and coherent social fabric. Life was structured around exogamous clans (*septs*) with totemic names drawn from the natural world—Bagh (tiger), Kachim (tortoise), Bokda (goat)—reflecting a deep kinship with their environment. Villages were often unclan settlements, fostering strong communal bonds governed by a council of elders at the *bernamunda*. Their cultural life was vibrant, marked by rituals and celebrations intrinsically linked to the agricultural calendar. The famous *demsa* dance, seasonal festivals like *Chait Parab* (ceremonial hunt) and *Nuakhia* (eating of new rice), and the institution of youth dormitories (*dhangda basa* and *dhangdi basa*) served as vital centers for social life, courtship, and the transmission of culture. Their worldview was one of complete symbiosis with nature. As primarily hill cultivators, their economy,

spirituality, and daily existence were inseparable from the forests, hills, and streams that were their home. Their deities were forces of nature and agriculture, such as *Jakar*, the earth goddess, underscoring a belief system where the land was not a resource to be owned but a sacred entity to be revered.

The unraveling of this world was not a single event but a protracted process of "slow violence"—a gradual, attritional destruction often invisible to the outside world. The first wound was inflicted during British colonialism, which introduced alien revenue systems and the concept of private land ownership, turning the tribe's communal, sacred territory into a saleable commodity. This historical trauma continues in the modern era through "development-induced displacement." Large-scale industrial projects—dams, infrastructure, and especially bauxite mining—have led to the forced eviction of tribal communities from their ancestral lands. The ongoing conflict over bauxite mining in the Mali Hills of Odisha is a direct, contemporary echo of the struggle for land at the heart of Mohanty's novel, a fight against the same forces of capital and state power. This slow violence operates through an insidious chain of causality. The imposition of a cash economy and incomprehensible laws creates indebtedness. Debt leads to bonded labor and land alienation. Land alienation forces displacement and migration into unfamiliar, often hostile environments. This physical

uprooting severs the tribe from its sacred geography, the very source of its culture and identity, leading to the breakdown of community bonds and social support networks. This social disintegration, in turn, accelerates the erosion of cultural practices and language, culminating in profound psychological trauma. The Matrix does not need to operate with overt force alone; its most effective weapon is this slow, grinding process that dismantles a people's world from the inside out.

The final, and most devastating, echo is the sound of this trauma. Displacement is not merely a change of address; it is a profound psychological wound that destroys community life, shatters kinship systems, and precipitates an identity crisis. It thrusts people into a state of "homelessness" and "purposelessness", leaving them with a crippling sense of loss. Research on dispossessed indigenous communities worldwide confirms a consistent and heartbreaking pattern of negative mental health impacts: chronic stress, anxiety, and fear; deep-seated grief, sadness, and depression; feelings of anger, frustration, hopelessness, and powerlessness. This clinical terminology gives a name to the silent anguish of Sukru Jani, his family, and his people. The fictional trauma that Mohanty so powerfully depicts is a direct representation of a real, collective, and ongoing psychological injury inflicted upon the Paraja and countless other indigenous groups. Their bodies and minds have become the living record of their dispossession, the corporeal echo of a world torn apart.

The voice of the Paraja is not a singular entity waiting to be discovered. It is a composite of echoes, a fragmented soundscape of loss that can only be pieced together through an act of deep and empathetic listening. It is the literary echo in Gopinath Mohanty's prose, which gives narrative shape and profound dignity to a people's suffering. It is the linguistic echo of a dying tongue, the ghost of a vocabulary that once held an entire worldview. And it is the corporeal echo of a traumatized people, whose bodies and minds bear the physical and psychological scars of dispossession.

To locate this voice is to understand that there is no escape from the Matrix. Sukru Jani's final, violent rebellion is not a victory; it is an act of pure, desperate rage that ends in his surrender to the system's authority. He cannot unplug. His story is a tragic affirmation of the system's totalizing power, a pessimistic but honest portrayal of the odds faced by indigenous communities.

Ultimately, the act of locating and listening to the Paraja voice is an ethical imperative. It demands that we listen past the deafening static of dominant narratives about "progress", "development", and "modernization." It is a call to recognize the slow, systemic violence that quietly erases entire worlds while the larger globe looks away. The story of Sukru Jani and the Paraja tribe is not a historical relic from 1945. It is a timeless and universal tragedy, an echo that reverberates today in every instance where a human-scaled, earth-bound culture confronts an all-consuming global machine. To truly hear that echo is the first, most necessary act of resistance.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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