UNIT 3 THEME AND PLOT

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3.0 OBJECTIVES

In this unit, we shall try to identify certain important aspects of a work of fiction. After closely analysing the unit, you should be able to understand the concept and meaning of the following things:

- theme and plot of Paraja
- the role theme plays in Paraja in determining our understanding of the novel and
- the significance of plot in Paraja for a satisfactory appreciation of the complex issues dealt with, in the narrative.

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In the earlier units, you have read in some detail about the history and development of the Odia novel. You have also learned about the writer, Gopinath Mohanty, his life and his career as a creative author in Unit 1. Unit 2 was devoted to the novel Paraja and gave you the story of the novel in brief. For a meaningful understanding of the novel, these expository units are crucial. But for a more nuanced and closer reading of a fictional work - one must adopt some more critical approaches. It is in this context that we shall define theme very simply and then look at the theme of Paraja as reflected in the novel.

3.2 DEFINITION AND MEANING OF THEME

Every work of art - literature, painting, sculpture or the performing arts such as music or drama deals with some specific fragment of human experience. We feel pleasure in reading a work of literature because in it we find the reflection of our own joys, sorrows, aspirations and dreams. Since a writer holds up a mirror to life in his/her work of artistic composition, the readers should feel that the emotions or ideas expressed in the novel, corresponds to our own. There is thus, a level of identification with the work with reference to the central idea developed in the text. It also enables the readers to participate in those experiences that they themselves may never have faced or been faced with.
However, it has to be accepted that life is a continuous process involving a multiplicity of events, episodes, people and points of view. Thus, life as a whole cannot be included in any work of art since any artistic work must have a complete and cohesive structure. It has to portray the inception, growth and development of a certain episode, incident or happening. The characters have to participate in that event, as part and parcel of a structured experience seen through the perspective of the individual author. This automatically ensures the fact that the readers must share the experience from the beginning to the end leading to the enrichment and fulfillment of character.

A work of art therefore, must be developed around a single, central idea that encompasses the philosophy and vision of the creative artist in a seminal form. By organising the work around a central idea and by giving it a carefully conceived structural design the novelist gives it an aesthetic dimension that helps the readers derive maximum aesthetic pleasure. The theme therefore, refers not merely to the subject of a literary work but rather a statement that the text seems to be making about that subject. Major novels of the English literary tradition centre round specific central concerns. For instance, Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* is said to deal with the theme of money and marriage. Charles Dicken’s *David Copperfield* traces the fortunes of the central character in the midst of chaotic circumstances. Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* portrays a woman’s quest for identity in a patriarchal world. Let us examine the theme of *Paraja* next.

### 3.3 THE THEME OF *PARAJA*

Let us now focus our critical attention on the primary strands of narratives in *Paraja* to come to an understanding on the major preoccupation of the novel. *Paraja* is a novel that centres round the joys, aspirations, hopes and failures of the aboriginal *Paraja* tribe that has its home among the rugged mountains and forests of Koraput in Odisha. The very word ‘tribe’ means a social group in a traditional society consisting of linked families or communities sharing customs and beliefs. In different parts of India, varied tribes live in their own – cocooned worlds and thus, are labeled as either uncivilised or backward. Let us not forget that the definition of what is civilised too is biased and is based on the hegemonic views of the ruling forces. The White British categorised the Indian Sub-continent people as browns who had to learn the ways of the modern world through them; they stamped the Africans as blacks who were tribals, thus, savages, barbarous and uncivilised and in need of education. The Whites entered with the Bible in one hand and the gun in the other. Thus, the tentacles of colonialism spread into the cultures of colonised nations and crippled the existing system. New definitions, new meaning, new interpretations replaced the old existing order. Apparently, colonialism is no more but evidently in the form of neo-colonialism, through economic and military dominations and more emphatically through cultural colonisation, the domination and its impact persist. Imperial culture appropriates both colonial as well as postcolonial culture and identity.

In the postcolonial set up, the subaltern suffers and remains the exploited lot. These include peasants, workers and other groups including tribes who are denied power and the benefits of mainstream culture. These people remain on the margins, the periphery of both i.e. power and benefits. Thus, we see that the tribals are people who are beyond mainstream culture and prefer to reside and live their lives in remote geographical territories, in the mountains as the tribes of Kinnaur,
Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Paraja* discusses at length the life of the Paraja tribe. Let us recall that one-fourth of the people of Odisha are tribals and one of the prominent aboriginal tribes is the Paraja tribe living among the rugged mountains and forests of Koraput district. In the near vicinity other tribes too reside and these are the Kondh, Gadaba and Jhodia. Thus, Paraja also refers to a conglomeration of three-four tribes who live together, celebrate festivals together, speak a similar language and share similar rituals and customs. Mohanty through his novel *Paraja* and through the protagonist of the novel -Sukru Jani narrates the story of this tribe. Sukru Jani thus, universalises not only his tribe but is also a representative of many such tribes who prefer to stay in their limited world but are being encroached upon by materialistic civilisation all because the external world wishes to gain power. Hence, the novel is an anthropological documentation as it reveals the past socio-cultural history of that place and people, and the compulsory changes that keep taking place time-to-time. Woven in between this simple turn of events of life to a complex narration of evolution, is the tale of human emotions and the theme of human endurance. The novel explores the diverse layers of their lives, primarily emphasising on their perpetual struggle with the hostile forces of both nature and society. In the course of reading the novel, we get to witness their way of life, customs and mores, festivals and religious practices, social interactions and cultural attitude. The novelist highlights in a realistic manner their exploitation at the hands of the money leaders and officers of law, the excruciating pain arising out of their yearning for love and the non fulfillment of their dreams. Their desire to live as free human beings on the land they own, to till it and live off the sweat of their labour with dignity is constantly thwarted by complex social forces.

Tribal life as depicted in the novel can be broadly categorised into two parts:

i) The infrastructure (ii) the rituals, customs and myths.

Let us first discuss the infrastructure. Mohanty at the very onset of the novel describes vividly the hamlet of Sarsupadar in the Eastern Ghats that consists of Lahaul and Spiti in Himachal Pradesh, in Uttrakhand, in the North Eastern states of India, in the plains of Bihar and deserts of Rajasthan, in Madhya Pradesh, Bengal, Odisha, and various parts of the southern states of our country. The tribals of different regions speak their own specific language; they believe in supernatural forces, spirits and myths, and follow their own customs and rituals. Though they may be poor educationally and economically, yet they are rich in the zest and love of life.

There is an immense body of tribal literature and many novelists have made successful attempts at depicting tribal life through their works. Most of the novels are written in the so-called regional languages or what the Sahitya Akademi calls ‘Bhasha Literature’ and then translated into English for the benefit of a wider readership. To list a few of these: Mahashweta Devi’s *Aranyer Adhikar* (Bengali) or *Jungle ke Davedar* (Hindi) or *Rights of the Forest* (English); “Kunti and the Nishadi”; Shaani’s *Sal Vanoon Ke Desh Mein* (Hindi) or *An Island of Sal*; Verrier Elwin’s *A Cloud that is Dragonish*; Rahul Sankrityayan’s travelogue *Kinnar Desh Mein*; Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya’s *Mrityunjay*. Many films too, have been made on tribal life depicting their association with the natural environment and the external modern world. Cutting across mediums, tribal dances are being popularised, art and sculpture by tribals is encouraged and clothes and jewellery are fashionable ethnic nowadays.
two clusters of thatched huts of the Paraja tribe and the Dombs. He describes the
twenty-two families that live in the village. Their profession is agriculture and
their staple diet is *mandia, olsi* and *kandula* (different kinds of millets). Men
wear just loin – cloth while the women wear saris. A description of Sukru Jani’s
house reveals the simple lifestyle of these tribal folk. Sukru Jani’s hut has a
single room divided into three compartments. The central compartment is used
both as a living room and as a store. The two compartments on either side are
only tiny cells. The hut is a low roofed shelter. Preserved in the house are
mango seeds to be crushed into powder, boiled and eaten; seeds of wild hedge –
plant *bai-gaba* crushed for oil; ten measure of *mandia* kept in containers made
of leaves sown together and dried bottle gourds used as flasks.

The Headman of the village known as *Naiki* collects the rent on behalf of the
Raja and delivers it to the Revenue Inspector or the *Ribini*. The Forest Guard -
the only arm of law collects the tax. Every villager owning a pair of bullocks has
to pay a ‘plough tax’ for the privilege of grazing his cattle in the forest. He is the
only person who is dressed in shirt and shorts. Another dignitary, a Domb –
known as ‘Barik’, the village watchman is always present when either the Forest
Guard or any other official arrives. The Headman’s ‘goti’ is somebody who has
borrowed money and has bound himself to serve his creditor as a slave for as
long as the debt remains unpaid. Tribals particularly those who are far away
from the main stream live under the constant threat of official persecution and
no existence in the jungle is possible unless one learns to play hide and seek with
the Forest Guard or the Law, and is able to lie with great moral conviction. Thus,
they live in constant fear and insecurity. They have an instinctive dread of paper
work and documentation. They are unable to displease officials as they are aware
that the so called civilised people, the powerful ones can handcuff them on some
pretext or the other, and that too within no time at all. Not only this, but the
whole tribe also pays a price for one man’s obstinacy. The officials terrorise the
poor tribals by threatening them. They handcuff the tribals and take away their
belongings, pull down their houses, recover fines and basically maltreat them.
Among the tribals if one is sent to prison one has to lose one’s caste which is
their only prized possession.

A piece of doggerel oft quoted by hill folk was:

*The forest Guard’s the rider,*

*The tribeman is the horse,*

*And always it’s the rider who*

*Decides upon their course.*

At the centre of the village is a hut that is the dormitory for all unmarried girls
while a little way away is the men’s dormitory. It has been an ancient Paraja
custom for all married boys and girls to sleep in their respective dormitories.
The Men – both young and old – have no education or material wealth but simply
believe in the strength of their sturdy limbs, their weather – proof skin; and their
sickness resistant bodies and work hard either on their lands or earn wages by
carrying loads etc. The women enjoy dressing up, oiling their hair, singing songs,
exchanging jokes, chatting and laughing either at the stream where they bathe or
go to fetch water or when at home while busy cooking or cleaning and completing
house-hold chores. They even go to the forest to collect edible roots, herbal
plants and fruits etc. The temple priest is known as *Jani* and the Gods of the tribe
are - *Lord Jhakar* – the All Pervading One and *Nisani Munda* the Earth Goddess.
Mohanty’s infrastructure of the village of the Parajas merges with the fictional landscape. The informative account of tribal geography combines well with the detailed analysis of festival and customs as depicted in the novel. Living within a feudal system the people of the primitive/traditional world are like the Mother earth – patient and enduring, who recoil and withdraw at the slightest interference from any materialistic quarter, as they are unaware of the evil machinations of the town/city people. The protagonist of our novel Paraja, Sukru Jani too suffers on this account. As we have already read, his daughters Bili and Jili are ensnared in the web woven by the Forest Guard and the money – lender, and Sukru Jani’s sons Mandia and Tikra also suffer on this account. In the second part we shall now discuss the customs, ritual and myths associated with the Paraja tribe as depicted in the novel.

As has already been discussed there were no taboos or restraints imposed on the younger generations in the village and though the unmarried boys and girls slept in their respective dormitories yet they met each other outside the hut and if something were to go wrong the elders would sit together in a conclave and the culprits would be penalised by being made to offer four annas worth of liquor to all the villagers; and then they would drink and dance and sing before the altar of the Earth Goddess and there the matter would end. They believed that God was a witness to their honesty and sincerity. Boys and girls had the right to elope, and in order to legalise their relationship the boy had to pay about forty rupees to the girl’s father as the customary bride price. While courting, the names by which the people addressed each other – both men and women – were Flower of the Sand, Fire Sand, Lovely Rice, Lovely Flowers, Red Sand, etc. Thus, a Paraja marriage required a minimum of formality. As soon as a boy and girl agreed to live together as man and wife, the marriage was solemnised by tribal custom. Only the conventional ritual remained; the Disari, or Soothsayer, would select an auspicious day for the rites; a tiny roof woven from twigs, would be propped up on supporting sticks three feet above the ground, and pigeons and fowls would be sacrificed to the sound of drums and bugles. Then the wedding feast, (a custom that seals the marriage bond) would be given and the ceremonies would be over. There were only four months in the year when people of the Paraja tribe may marry, the months being: February, March, April and May.

Chapter 49 has a detailed description of Kajodi and Bagala’s marriage. A smear of turmeric from the man’s body and a smear of castor oil from his hair are rubbed on the woman and the ritual is repeated vice-versa. Symbolically, it represents the union of two people. Thereafter, the man presses the left foot of the woman with his right foot and spits three times on her face and the women repeats it. Necklaces and rings are exchanged; ends of clothes knotted; and each takes a ritual dip in the stream. The priest offers eggs in sacrifice. After this they go to the square of the ancestral stones, offering sacrifices to God en-route. The Spirit of the ancestors is propitiated with eggs, rice and mahua wine. The bride and groom bow low in obeisance before going to their new house. Rice and turmeric paste is scattered on the heads of the couple amidst mantra chanting by the priest. A black rooster pecks at the grain of rice on the head before being sacrificed. The bride is adorned in a silver necklace, gold ear – rings and a gold nose ring before the ceremonial wedding feast starts. A Paraja girl has the right to choose any man that she likes and to cast him off and take another if she wants to. She has the right to make, break and build another home, as she likes and whenever she wills to do so.
Belonging to the forests and associated with the agricultural profession most of the festivals of the tribals people are invariably related to the harvest. During the Spring Festival they not only anoint scarlet powder on their face but also colour other villagers. Such a festival amongst the Paraja is very similar to the other major Indian festival of Holi. It is a time for revelry, dancing, hunting and feasting. November is called the month of the festival of lights. In December, the tribes jointly observe one of their major festivals to mark the gathering of the harvest that is followed fifteen days later, by the ritual eating of the new grain. At the time of the Harvest Festival, all men return to their villages to celebrate the festival with family and friends. On the morning of the festival, people wake up early, full of enthusiasm and start the day – long preparation for the evening. After an early mandia gruel meal the men go to the jungle to collect wood for the bonfire and the women daub their houses with colours – walls are painted in white and red, verandas are plastered in black and yellow and the floors inside are smeared with varied hued designs, the wooden frames of the doors and windows are painted with powdered charcoal mixed in oil. Some women are busy washing and boiling clothes with wood ash to bleach them or make them white. Thereafter, they busy themselves in dressing up. They wash and dress up in colourful saris, tuck flowers in oiled hair, wear bangles and necklaces and get ready for the evening.

At dusk the festivities begin with loud cries of ‘Thief’! ‘Thief’! The youngsters stealing from their neighbour’s houses initiate the fun, though the next day the stolen object is restored to the owner. Thereafter, there is singing and dancing. Another ritual performed during this festival at the time of the dance is that, a black rooster is killed in front of a pile of logs, and the fresh blood is allowed to drain into the soil. Then some liquor, freshly distilled from mahua flowers, is poured on the same spot and is mingled with the blood. This is the libation to the Earth Goddess, sealed with an offering of flowers. Next, the rooster dripping blood is held over a pile of wood; a few flowers are placed ceremonially on the logs, some more liquor is poured on it, and the flame is lit. A great shout goes up as the logs crack and blaze. The next day children paint their cheeks white and black, their clothes are multicoloured and with sticks in hand they go begging for alms from house to house and they are given handful of rice or mandia. The festival continues for a month.

The dates of the Spring Festival have to be carefully calculated by the soothsayers of all the tribes. The Kondh astrologer makes his calculations from the stars; the Paraja Disari consults his almanacs. The ‘Disari’ is all knowing for the Paraja tribemen. The God of Spring has to be invoked; the Kondhs desire the rites to be performed at the exact moment when two stars appear over Elephant Hill, while the Paraja wait for the appropriate moment that is commenced by the call of three barking deers in the forest and the village priest of ‘Jani sacrifices a barking deer at the altar; thereafter, a pigeon is sacrificed on the appearance of the two stars. During, the interval between the two sacrifices, the headman prostrates before the altar of the gods with his face to the ground, a bit of straw held between his teeth and a halter around his neck, as a mark of humility. After the invocation, the festival begins. All villagers must walk in a procession to the god’s shrine (men in one file and women in the other) and beg him to grace their festival. For them, God lives in the deep jungles, far away from human breath, walks on un-trodden soils, lives in a shrine housed by bills, overgrown thick forest, and his divine neighbours are: Basumati, the Earth Goddess; Jhakar, the god for all
Gopinath Mohanty: Paraja

seasons – and Bagh Debta, the tiger god. The shrine is an ancient and enormous mango tree. The villagers smear the tree trunk with sacred vermilion paste, pigeon and fowl are sacrificed and offerings of liquor are poured into the soil that is then decorated with patterns drawn in coloured powders. The drummers beat furiously on their drums. Suddenly all noises cease and the priest climbs on the top of huge boulder facing the tree, raises his torch to the sky and then begins the incantation to the Gods. The parajas then shake various blossoms and tend to the mango fruits in order to make them fall to the ground in a carpet like manner. Men and women sing and dance and with this the ceremony ends. The village folk form ranks and climb up the hill once again. Later at night in the open square of the village, a bonfire is lit, erect stones representing men, flat ones representing women are placed in honour of the ancestors and the dance begins. Death ceremony too in the Paraja tribe is solemnised by placing a stone vertically for men and laying it flat for women. In a corner of the open space in the center of the village where the tribal dances and assemblies are held, sheltered by the shade of an old mango tree is a memorial to all the dead of the village.

The novel describes the lives of tribals in jungles which is basically a question of survival. Poisonous plants and ravenously hungry animals pose a constant threat to these people who have to visit the interior of forests either as herdsmen or as labourers. In Paraja Mohanty highlights various issues of the Paraja tribe subtly. A number of questions related to the identity and life style of tribals are raised. For a tribal, his/her life is his/her land, his/her forests, his/her natural environment. For him/her ecological issues and environmental concerns mean little, as s/he is still unaware of these issues. The novel also exposes a pertinent fact that the tribals are still being exploited in this world and because of extreme illiteracy and poverty they are forced to live in sub-human conditions. The second half of the novel discusses at length the moving away of the tribals, their migration to other states, legal difficulties, tribal rights and the question and nature of identity. The writer emphatically points at the unscrupulous means adopted by non-tribals in usurping tribal land through unfair methods. The attitudes are changing as commercialisation infiltrates into the lives of tribals. More and more tribal folk are getting displaced due to economic and legal reasons. Inequality and bonded labour has led to pain, anguish and humiliation of these simple tribal people. Their ignorance adds to their woes, making them easy victims of exploitation. Thus, the novel if, on the one hand acquaints us with life style, culture, rituals and customs of tribal folk, then, on the other it highlights the problems being faced by the tribals.

Gopinath Mohanty portrays diverse aspects of the lives of a Paraja family through a multiplicity of situations. Sukru Jani longs to plough more and more land to ensure the economic security of his family, in the pursuit of his longings, he gets enmeshed in a web of inexplicable economic rules in the hands of the moneylender, his dreams are unfulfilled and he and his sons take revenge by butchering the villainous Sahukar. The novelist lyrically depicts the flowering of human emotions as he shows the young men and women falling in love (Mandia Jani and Kajodi, Jili and Bagla).

Songs and dance are a vital part of the oral tradition and of tribal life. The songs in oral literature are narrative and reflective as they broaden our horizons on the traditions and folklore of that tribe and the age as well. The songs are also termed as ‘oral formulaic poetry’ that means ‘poetry that is composed and transmitted
by singers or reciters’. Its origins are pre-historic and it continues to flourish amongst population that is illiterate. Additions and deletions take place in the narrative as it is passed by word of mouth, from one generation to another orally. Despite the fact that these oral compositions have no fixed variation yet these poems or songs incorporate verbal formulas – set words, word patterns, and refrains which help to recall, repeat and readjust to changing times. The themes of the songs vary from traditional folk epic subjects like tribal heroes, love, romance and day-to-day routine chores.

Orality and literacy are interrelated and mutually interactive. Mohanty incorporates songs in his novel *Paraja* as they form an inevitable part of tribal life and culture. The songs touch upon all areas of tribal life. These songs underline the deep-rooted-ness of the tribal’s relationship with his/her surroundings, rituals, customs, Gods and supernatural forces. Their simplicity is reflected through these songs and their intentions are mirrored in these orations. The songs are an inseparable part of the text and one has to understand the theoretical concerns highlighted through them. These songs correspond to the lives of the various characters of the novel and exhibit their emotions. They help to build the atmosphere of the novel. The novel makes use of love, ritual, festival, work, seasonal, and miscellaneous songs. The songs are an expression of their deepest emotions – the *rasa* and the *bhava* – love, fear, hope, hatred, anguish, pain, ecstasy, be it at work or in relationships; be it at the altar of God or at the change of seasons or celebrations of festivals.

Songs are not solely a part of the Paraja community but all over the world in tribes or in non-tribes as well, they are an expression of feelings on different occasions; an external manifestation of internal, hidden, unsaid emotions. The words voice the flow of thoughts. Let us read through these songs:

**Love Songs:**

*The garment of many colours which you wear,*  
*That sari woven in Lower Maliguda,*  
*Wash it clean again, wash it quickly*  
*For my sake, beloved, come out in your very best,*  
*Wear you bangles around your wrists.*  
*Come out quickly; come, my love.*  
*Let us romp together, let us dance*  
*In this village of our forefathers,*  
*That village of your mother’s brother,*  
*The village of your grandfather,*  
*There is no shame,*  
*There is no fear,*  
*You have caught no fish,*  
*You have caught no crab.*  

That is the song that Bagla sings for Jili and plays on his *dungudunga*. The song set off all kinds of visions in his mind.

*O my darling jayi flower!*  
*My Sweet malli bud!*
Come with star-white in your dark hair;
I wait.
I know that you will come, beloved;
For you are as unfailing
As death is.

There are only two things I know to be true –
Your love, and the fear of death.

I play each day with death
And so I know that you will come –
Mingling your black hair with the dark clouds;
For the rains have come.
The sky grows dark,
My eyes are blinded by the lightning
The moon's fire is extinguished, the stars are put out.
The earth gropes in the dark.
The raindrops patter on the thatch-eaves;
The river sings and the mountains join the chorus,
And the frogs make music,
And the kadamba tree listens in ecstasy –
Its flowers bristle, like hairs standing on end.
And your coming to me in the rain
Is the bride's home-coming.
For the new bride washes the feet of her elders
In the custom of our tribe.

You are the rain, the new bride.
The raindrops fill my heart with joy. (135-136)

This was a love song that the Paraja men sang when the rains commenced.

Work Songs

Daily we labour in this field of mandia
And pour our sweat on this land;
And the crops ripen and are harvested,
Are located in carts and taken away and stored.
For whom are they preserved, my love?
They are for you, darling of my heart.
For you, the maizes in my garden,
And the mandia in my fields;

When, drunk with home-brewed beer.
My eyes are flushed and unsteady,
I shall call to you, my darling,
And you must come.
But come secretly, my love,
When the moon is in the sky,
Treading softly on the shadowy patches under the trees;
For though I shall be waiting for you
I have my shame and fear,
In this village of my mother’s brother,
In this village of my father’s brother,
And if I am exposed
I shall run away in fear
But O, my darling,
We have turned our blood into water
And coaxed the mandia to bear fruits;
It is all for you, my beloved,
It is all for you. (58-59)

**Festival Songs**

Let the bangles on your wrists ring together,
Let them clash, O my beloved!
Let us all join in the dance of the Clashing of the Bangles,
As it was danced by our fathers long ago.
Let his ancient village ring again with the sound of your bangles –
This Village of the Mango Fruit or village of the Blackberry,
Whatever we choose to name it. So dance, and make merry, and laugh.
Till the belly begins to ache. (93-94)
This song was sung when the young men and women performed the dance of the
Clashing of the Bangles.

_O god of joy, god of dance and song,
God of the hunt,
Come, make us gay._

Be our guest:
_Drink the liquor we have brewed for you,
Accept the fowl and chicken that we offer._
Then, when the few days of the feast are spent,
You may return to your home.

_Only come, come, come._ (144)

_O mighty god of Spring._
_Awake!
Shake off your sleep._
_See, the trees are heavy with flowers._
_The Chaitra moon is in the sky._
_We are all dressed up for the dance_
In your honour:
And the young men and girls are waiting.
Wake up, and come!

It is you that the young man remembers
As he stands with his sweetheart
Under the liquor-palm tree,
Arms linked together;
You inspire their songs,
You are the light in lover’s eyes.
You bring the newborn babies to our land,
Like a welcome shower of young mango fruits,
So that we may never lack strong arms
To plough our barren and rocky lands.

Wake up, god of the hunt!
For the trees are beginning to shed their leaves,
And there are fires in the forest
And the wild beasts are driven out of hiding.
The wild boar swarm in the sandy river-bebs;
The spotted bear,
And the king – deer with big, branching horns,
Roam everywhere in the glens.
Of the wild hare also no count can be made.
Come, lead us in the hunting.
And we shall feast together.
Those who were old are dead,
But we shall not mourn them.
For such is life,
And each must go in his turn.

But every year, when Spring comes,
Every year, in the month of Chaitra,
Your rites will be celebrated.
In this sacred valley where you live,
And through your grace
The mango shall blossom again
The crops shall grow in our fields,
And our cattle grow fat,
And men shall prosper
In this land of forests and hills.
This is our scared pledge,
O god of sping! (146-48)
These were the songs sung at the time of the Spring Festival.

**Miscellaneous Songs**

**Old Ballad**

*Old ballads in the Paraja dialect*

*Now come, my darling,*

*Are you as strong as the walls of a stoutly built house?*

*Are you as strong as the veranda of the brewer’s house?*

*Come, let me see how robust you are in your youth.*

*(26)*

*Here today and gone tomorrow,*

*And money cannot buy it.*

*(186)*

*It was a song about young love. It continued.*

*No one can find it,*

*Though many die searching.*

*One moment you may see it*

*By the winding jungle trial;*

*But it quickly hides again.*

*Money can buy everything.*

*But love it cannot buy.*

*And then the chorus again:*

*Here today and gone tomorrow,*

*And money cannot buy it.*

*(186)*

**Paraja Song**

*Are you as strong as the veranda of the Sundhi’s house?*

*Come, my girl, let me test how strong and young you are.*

*(281)*

The writer does not explain these self-explanatory songs, but informs the reader that they are an indivisible part of the people. We understand the contextual meaning of the song and not the background or historical significance. These songs can be understood better by those who know and understand the Paraja custom and language, and are accustomed to their way of life. It is not easy for the translator to translate songs as the untranslatability factor for certain expressions and words cannot be ignored. To translate poetry, songs or music is the most difficult thing. The rhythm, the intensity and sometimes the meaning are lost in the process of translation. Yet, the translator has made his best efforts to translate these Paraja songs into English from the source language – Odia, for the benefit of a wide readership.

However, though Mohanty delineates so many interesting aspects of human relationships in the form of emotions such as ambition, revenge, love and exploitation, he does not concentrate on any single idea or notion to highlight it as the predominant theme of the novel. What do you think?
3.4 WHAT IS PARAJA ABOUT?

A close analysis of the novel will tell us that the predominant idea of the novel - the central one that pervades through the entire novel – is the crucial matter of human existence in the face of antagonistic social constraints. Despite their uncomplicated and zestful life, the life of the Parajas is characterised by the shadow of some unseen and inscrutable power whose wrath drives the characters relentlessly to death and destruction. Sukru Jani always dreams of a hopeful future:

*He feels happy with life. It has been as he wanted it to be, and some kind and benevolent spirit has made everything bright and beautiful for him. And when he thinks of his future he has no doubt that it will be brighter still. He fancies that he can even see it in the far distance, in vivid detail. A number of houses have been built for him and his sons and his grand sons. Yes, they are all there.*

But his vision is not transformed into reality. Ambition, greed and internal conflict within the tribe create insurmountable odds for Sukru Jani and his family to procure any help in their moment of crisis. The novelist powerfully depicts two facets of the Paraja community’s life - firstly, Sukru Jani’s aspirations for a fulfilling future that are disturbed and doomed due to the indefinable and complex process by which he and his children are transformed from free men into ‘gotis’ or serfs, bound to the Sahukar for life. Secondly, Mohanty seeks to portray the undaunted courage, outstanding resilience and never-say-die attitude of Sukru Jani and each member of his family. In spite of the influx of problems that overwhelm them at various junctures of their life, they do not give up hope.

*Mandia had adjusted to the life of a goti far more easily than the others; perhaps it was because of his greater resilience. He rarely brooded like his father. The shock had worn off and he had grown buoyant again. He never bothered to count his tomorrows, for he was sure that his time would come. Optimism comes naturally to the tribesman; he is never quite cured of it.* (p. 106)

The Parajas as a community and as the individual members of the community that we come across in the course of the narrative believe in the act of living life to the full. They toil hard to improve their lot, seek out love and follow their dreams. The novel constantly focuses on the joy and peace that govern the lives of the tribals through the narrative. Their buoyant optimism and undying hope, do not desert them even after they go through a series of misfortunes. On the other hand, Mohanty’s protagonist Sukru Jani is not merely the primitive tribesman ensnared by the predatory moneylender from the city. He is also the quintessential man who wages a heroic but futile war against extra-cosmic and invisible powers but ultimately has to accept and adjust. He fights hard to undo the decree, but his endless struggle is of no avail. His plight reminds us of Aeschylus’s comment in *Agamemnon* that “as fate has willed so shall it be fulfilled”.

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Besides the story of the novel, what are the important aspects in the study of a novel?

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2) What role does theme play in a novel?

3) What, according to you is the theme of Paraja?

3.5 DEFINING PLOT

A close interpretation of the theme of the novel should help us understand an author’s narrative purpose and authorial vision better. It offers us a better perception of the content of the novel that we are studying. Another significant aspect of the novel that we have been acquainted with is the plot of the novel. We have already talked about plot in Block I, Unit 2 and here we reiterate the definition of plot for better understanding. Plot in the context of the novel may be defined as the schematic structure including the major events in the narrative. It is important at this point to distinguish between plot and story. Story refers to a narrative of events, ordered chronologically but a plot is much more than this. The story is the raw material from which the plot is constructed. Crafting a plot requires choosing not only the elements of a story to be included — and the order in which they are to be narrated - but also relating the events of a story to one another so that causality may be established convincingly. This cause and effect relationship between interrelated events is always taken into critical consideration by a novelist. A novelist structures his/her narrative by closely linking character and motivation into the fabric of his/her work. A story can merely arouse a sense of suspense in the readers’ mind as to what happens next in the narrative. A novel demands a more careful and nuanced interpretation of psychology, motivation and human behaviour as we have to follow why a particular character behaves in a specific manner that ultimately leads to a turn
in the sequence of events. A plot is the skeletal structure that gives vital support to the very fabric of the story.

The plot as we may understand finally is the pattern of events and situations in a narrative work, as selected and arranged both to emphasise relationships - usually of cause and effect - between incidents and to elicit a particular kind of interest in the reader or audience such as surprise or suspense. In the next section, we shall discuss the plot of Paraja.

### 3.6 THE PLOT OF PARAJA

By now you should have read the novel Paraja. We shall try and trace the pattern of the plot in the novel in this section. As we have discussed earlier, causality is the most important ingredient in the plot of a novel. In short, all episodes, actions and events are closely connected with each other in a novel. One action leads to another action in a chain of interrelated events, determining the lives of the characters in the narrative. The shadow of an inscrutable power that overwhelms the life of the Parajas is not comparable to the issue of chance and coincidence as in a Hardy novel. In fact, Gopinath Mohanty lays the basis of the narrative structure in the desire and consequent action of the central characters of the novel thereby, leading to the intricacies of the plot.

The novel revolves around Sukru Jani, a patriarch of the Paraja tribe whose life represents the tragic degeneration of a close-knit community. The members of the Paraja tribe live their lives according to the primary laws of nature and pursue their lives without much higher ambitions. In spite of the simple and uncomplicated nature of their lives, Sukru Jani commits an error that initiates a chain of interrelated events finally culminating in the murder of the Sahukar.

The forest guard, presented in terms of a predator is an alien to the native community, nursing lecherous desires for the young women of the tribe. In spite of his knowledge of the intrinsic evil lurking in the character of the forest guard, Sukru Jani asks for permission to fell trees in order to follow his dream of owning a piece of cleared land for agricultural purposes. He does not realise that clearing forest lands for agricultural purposes is illegal. His innocent desire for more land leads him into the trap of the forest guard most unwittingly. The guard gives his permission for clearing the land only to boldly express his sexual desires for Jili, Sukru Jani’s elder daughter. Refused by both father and daughter, the guard wreaks vengeance on the family by imposing undue and heavy fines on him. The guard’s manipulation compels Sukru Jani to borrow money from the Sahukar that finally leads him and his sons into becoming gotis or bonded labourers of the money lender.

The novelist traces the pitiable degradation of the family unit as the male members of the family are forced to leave the two girls without any means to look after themselves. After a period of waiting and employing all strategies of physical and emotional survival, Jili and Bili become labourers for the town contractor. Economic depravity, alienation from the tribal way of life and loss of her lover, goads Jili into becoming the mistress of the contractor. Their father, Sukru Jani persuades them to come away with him to their dilapidated house, eventually rescuing both sisters. In course of time Bili manages to find a bridegroom for herself, while, Jili becomes the concubine of the despicable Sahukar. Jili barters out her beauty and youth in lieu of cheap luxuries and comforts given to her by
the Sahukar. The novel ends in the brutal act of murder, as Sukru Jani and his sons finally butcher the Sahukar for years of indescribable exploitation and for shattering the Paraja’s sense of honour by taking the daughter of their family as his mistress.

After having traced the main events in the plot, let us try to answer a question. How is the plot of the novel helpful in highlighting the significance of the theme? The structural mosaic of the plot consists of a strategic arrangement of events and episodes and explains how the author wants his readers to assess the motives of the characters. We are led to reflect on whether Gopinath Mohanty wishes us to interpret the Parajas as powerless individuals suffering untold miseries in the hands of a few social exploiters, or does he believe in the dictum that “Character is destiny” to suggest human beings are ultimately responsible for their own individual actions? The movement of the plot suggests that we pay close attention to the development of episodes in order to establish effective connections and finally internalise the vision that the novelist conveys through the plot. The plot then may be defined as that crucial element of the narrative that holds the action together.

Check Your Progress 2

1) How would you distinguish ‘story’ from ‘plot’?

2) What strategy does the novelist adopt to transform mere actions of a story into a formal plot?

3) How is the theme of the novel Paraja related to its plot?

3.7 LET US SUM UP

As we have understood from the earlier sections of the unit, the two most significant aspects of a work of literature are theme and plot. The theme of a novel is the salient, central idea that emerges from a literary work’s treatment of its subject matter embodying the novelist’s vision of life. A plot offers the structural
Gopinath Mohanty: *Paraja*

foundation on which a novel is built. A well-structured plot is inextricably connected to the theme of the narrative.

### 3.8 HINTS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

**Check Your Progress 1**

1) Two other aspects of the novel besides the story are theme and plot.

2) The theme helps the novelist give a formal shape to his/her ideas that she conveys through his/her work.

3) *Paraja* depicts the rise and fall in fortunes of a tribal patriarch, Sukru Jani and his family due to a complex network of social and economic circumstances.

**Check Your progress 2**

1) Whereas a story is a mere chronology of events, a plot is a complex mosaic of episodes linked to each other in causal relation.

2) The novelist organises his events in a manner that they may relate to one another in a logical sequence.

3) The theme of gradual degeneration of fortunes of a tribal family is delineated through a careful choice of interrelated episodes in the novel, *Paraja*. 