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THE BESIEGED ADIVASI CULTURE:
A STUDY OF GOPINATH MOHANTY’S THE ANCESTOR

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Abstract:
Working in alliance with the colonial administration, Christian missionaries took Christianity to
the remote hill tribes of Odisha, who had already been oppressed by anti-tribal colonial policies, to 'save
their souls'. The missionaries carried on a campaign of discrediting the tribal worldview and culture,
which preserved and celebrated humans' primal interconnectedness with nature. Christianity, which set
man above nature in a dichotomy, ran counter to the tribals' lived experience of kinship with nature. As a
result, conversion to Christianity precipitated a spiritual void and alienation in the Dombs, the first
converts. The neighbouring pristine Paraja community loses moral fibre when the alien culture rudely
intruded into it through a Christian-convert Domb girl, who deliberately violated tribal ethos to seduce a
Paraja boy. The pain and the suffering that overwhelmed the affected Paraja family are poignantly
portrayed in Gopinath Mohanty's novel The Ancestor.

Key Words: Tribal worldview, Christianity, dichotomy, alienation, ground of being, mythical thinking,
colonizing, limbo, epistemology.

The personal and collective trauma suffered by Indian indigenous people, or adivasis, during the
turbulent sociological changes and devastating economic crisis under the colonial rule caught the attention
of a very few writers like Mahasweta Devi and Gopinath Mohanty, who had great respect and love for
adivasis and their culture. They narrated their plight, giving voice to their agony and pain, and restored
their rightful place in history. The present paper studies the pathetic lives of the Dombs, one of the tribes
branded by the colonial administrators as criminal, who are forced to convert to Christianity, and the
effects of the alienation and the emptiness they suffered after their conversion, as depicted by Gopinath
Mohanty in his short Odiya novel The Ancestor or Dadi Budha. The paper explores tribal epistemology
and wisdom, and how the role of two important Christian-convert Dombs in the novel points to the grievous
threat posed to the pristine Paraja culture by missionary Christianity and colonialism, using mainly the
observations of the Harvard anthropologist, David Maybury-Lewis, the Colombian-Canadian
anthropologist, Wade Davis, the British philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, the British poet William
Scammell, and the Indian researcher in social and cultural anthropology, Meena Radhakrishna.

Introduction:
The colonial powers carried out systematic violation andsubjaguation of indigenous communities
in the colonies with unprecedented violence, while Christian missionaries, who almost always
collaborated with the colonial authorities, conducted vicious attacks against their 'dark' and 'superstitious'
presents several instances of cultural violence against native tribes by colonists and missionaries. In 1850,
every aspect of the traditional cultural life of the natives in Polynesia was formally outlawed by the French
colonial administrators (170) and the religious beliefs of the natives were dismissed as crude idolatry by
the missionaries. (52) In Colombian Amazon, the sacred trumpets of the Barasana Indians were
condemned as symbols of the devil and were crushed and burnt by the Catholic priests. (101) In 1835,
Reverend William Yates compared the Australian Aborigines todogs, which deserved to be shot. (151) The
indigenous peoples of Tasmania were wiped out by the British colonists, and the Reverend John West, a Christian missionary, rationalized the slaughter as the necessary cleansing of the land of an offensive people. (170) When the Catholic missionaries went to the Inuit tribe in the Arctic under the colonial rule of Canada in the 1930s, they immediately set about destroying the Inuit culture. Encouraged by the colonial authorities, they attracted the Inuit people to the mission and away from the land by trading goods. (208)

In India, the twin forces of colonialism and missionary Christianity precipitated the material and cultural disintegration of adivasis. While the colonizers seized control over the adivasis’ means of survival, Christian missionaries mounted a systematic assault on tribal religion, traditions and beliefs. Professing to ‘save the souls’ of the ‘barbarous and savage’ adivasis, they conducted a proselytization campaign, covertly aiming to colonize their minds, thereby completing the colonialist agenda of total subjugation of the adivasis. The political and cultural aggression broke down the tribals’ ancient way of life, and the trauma threw them into existential crisis. The outward manifestations of that crisis were different from tribe to tribe, and, sometimes, even from family to family in a tribe. Some assimilated the practices of the dominant alien culture, while some resisted the change. However, both the groups the ones who adopted the alien culture and the ones who remained in their own fold suffered; the former suffered alienation and the latter faced a cultural assault. The cultural and the economic crisis brought about disintegration and internal rifts in many tribal communities.

Gopinath Mohanty’s tribal novels depict the havoc wreaked by colonialism on the lives of the Parajas and the Dombs in Odisha, and the cultural assault the Parajas faced from the missionaries. Showing the essential humanity of these primitive people, they portray the grave injustice of the suffering inflicted on them. Even as they celebrate the beauty of the pristine culture of the Parajas, with their simple, natural and unself-conscious way of life, they narrate the tragedy of individual lives affected by the assaults on their culture and survival. The shock, the turmoil, the anger and the emptiness that were felt by these besieged people find expression in these novels.

**Introduction to the Writer and the Novel:**

Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1991) is a renowned Odia writer and winner of many prestigious awards like Padma Bhushan and Jnanapith for his contribution to Indian literature. His major literary concerns are the recognition of the richness of tribal culture and the exploitation of the tribes. He received the Central Sahitya Akademi award in 1955, for his novel *Amrutara Santama* (1949). His novels, based on the life of the tribes, express his deep love for them and have a wealth of cultural material. *Paraja* (1945), his another novel, though about the Paraja tribe in Odisha, mirrors the condition of the tribes everywhere in India, who are exploited by moneylenders, and cheated by petty officials and the bureaucracy of the state.

*The Ancestor or Dadi Buddhita* (1944) is his first novel about tribal life. It is set in the densely-wooded hills and valleys of the Eastern Ghats in the undivided Koraput district of Southern Odisha before Independence. It is a rich tapestry of adivasi religion and culture with their rituals and practices pictured through the life of Paraja tribe. It narrates the poignant story of how Christianity and an individualistic culture that came riding on the wave of colonialism collude to disrupt their simple, peaceful, ancient way of life. Mohanty shows with sympathy the Dombs’ pitiful state that forces them to survive by any means. Dispossessed by colonial policies, and cast out by other tribes, the Dombs are lured by Christianity and the glamour of urban culture spawned by colonialism, and this leads to the breakdown of the life of the total tribal community. Eleo, the first generation Christian-convert, shows a shrewd understanding of the changing tribal situation, but he is indoctrinated to rubbish the tribal intuitive vision and wisdom, and poses an insidious threat to the tribal culture. Santosh Kumari, a young, second-generation Christian-convert girl, dreaming of a free life of enjoyment in the city, goes against tribal ethos and seduces a Paraja boy and becomes the instrument of the ruin of the family.

**The Dombs and their social status:**

The Dombs are a tribe living in various tribal regions. However, in the caste Hindu society, they are
sometimes treated as 'outcasts'. When the city encroached on the forest, the Dombs were pushed to the lower rung of the Hindu caste system. Their traditional job of skinning dead animals was treated as menial, and they got into pillaging when they lost rights to the forest. They were branded as a criminal tribe by the British Government in 1871 under The Criminal Tribes Act.

In the tribal regions, some Dombs are sedentary, whereas others lead a nomadic life along with a number of other tribal peoples such as the Lambadas. In his doctoral thesis, Suna Birendram mentions that the Odia Dombs are widespread throughout the Navrangpur district, and numerically they are next to the Kondhs. They are weavers and drummers by profession and enjoy great influence over others for their ability to play the different scales of music in tribal festivals, tribal temples, and marriage ceremonies. The Dombs are mostly traders in cattle and chillis. Some Dombs earn their livelihood by cultivation and weaving. Within the Odia Domb, there is a section of the population who are known as Khangar Domb, who are involved in theft and robbery. (135)

In the districts of southern Odisha, the Dombs were the external face of adivasis. They acted as counsellors and village choukidars. When colonialism entered the adivasi world, their advantageous role quickly turned into a token exploiter. Because of the social conditions they lived in, and their exposure to the mainstream society, they became crafty. When Christianity created an opportunity to climb the social ladder, the Dombs converted to Christianity. It may have given them social acceptance in a limited sphere mainly in urban areas, but in the tribal areas their condition was not different from that of other tribal groups.

The Aims of Colonialism and the Role of the Missionaries:

Colonialism was portrayed by the colonizers as a divine mission, 'the white man's burden', inspired by the ideals of Christ, to bring about liberation in spiritual, cultural, economic and political spheres by imparting the knowledge of the West to 'ignorant' and 'savage' people throughout the world. The missions of colonialism and Christianity often overlapped and appeared almost always indistinguishable. Colonialism was instrumental in paving a path for Christianity to penetrate even remote regions with amazing facility. On their part, the Christian religious authorities acted as facilitators in European efforts to exploit the indigenous people. In the guise of instructing to 'civilize' every 'savage' they encountered, they created rifts, exploiting the fault-lines in the existing social order. The missionary objective of 'taming and civilizing' was also a central objective of colonialism, used to rationalize and justify their exploitation. In this context, the observation of the black psychoanalyst and philosopher Frantz Fanon is illuminating:

The Church in the colonies is a whiteman's Church, a foreigner's Church. It does not call the colonized to the ways of God, but to the ways of the whiteman, to the ways of the master, the ways of the oppressor. And as we know, in this story many are called but few are chosen. (The Wretched of the Earth 7)

The early missionaries influenced the British opinion with their pioneering feats of geography and their descriptions of indigenous cultures. Colonial governments relied on missionaries to provide the infrastructure that was beneficial to their interests, such as translating books, which would give them 'knowledge' about the local people, and imparting English education by establishing schools, which would create people who would obediently serve the British.

In the nineteenth-century, in many places, the missionaries played a crucial role in providing famine relief and helping the poor through various philanthropic and social activities. Yet, their role in developing a work force for the British Raj is unquestionable. The British, with their administrative procedures such as the Permanent Settlement Act, and Forest Policies and developmental activities like building railways and establishing agricultural farms, incapacitated many tribal societies. Especially, the Criminal Tribe Act (CTA) devastated the lives of minority tribal groups. On their part, the Christian missionaries attracted these tribal groups to develop a Christian base in the tribal regions.
this base, they widened the social rifts among the various tribal communities to their advantage. This encouraged internal exploitation. On another side, some missionaries were hand in glove with the colonial government and were influential in establishing the ‘criminality’ of some tribes, and in establishing settlements to ‘reform’ them as they had done in Australia and other countries. Their ulterior motive was to create a workforce for the colonial expansionist policies. Meena Radhakrishna, in her book *Dishonoured by History*, reveals the aims of one such missionary organization, the Salvation Army, which was active in the Madras province since 1908. It was entrusted with a thousand Doms in Gorakhpur, who were branded as a criminal tribe, to bring about reformation in them. Meena Radhakrishna writes that some men were repeatedly flogged and then they ‘happily’ adjusted to the work in the Salvation Army factory. (72) The Salvation Army’s methods and approaches were influential in bringing an amendment to CTA in 1911, which required the members of the criminal tribes to report to the nearby police station regularly, sometimes, four times a day and even at the odd hours of midnight.

Lakshman Gaikwad in his novel *Uchalya* writes about the fate of these notified tribes even after they were declared denotified (DNT) after Indian Independence. The Imperial law, and later the Indian law, treated them as criminals. They would be suspected if they had even a slightly worthy object in their houses. No member of the ‘criminal tribe’ knew when he would be called by the police. Mohanty in *Amrutara Santana* writes that they had to be under the continuous surveillance of the police. Their women had to satisfy the lust of the government officials. Their conditions forced them to live with meager or almost no means of livelihood. These living conditions and the continuous threat from officials and the police blunted their sensibilities. They took to cunning and deceiving as a means of their livelihood. They practised these on no matter who the other person was, whether an official or a tribal suffering like themselves. This situation created a rift between the Doms and other tribal communities who were still engaged in the traditional ways.

**The alien religion and its effects on the converts:**

The Doms in *the Ancestor* too face physical insecurity and spiritual alienation. There are only four Domb families and some of them live on small thefts and skimming animals, and some like Eleo and Chancheri work for the Paraja community, living in a separate street from them. Their circumstances led the Doms to accept the alien faith. As they are converts, they do not directly participate in Paraja rituals and festivities but they are present in the day-to-day life of the Parajas and they still retain their old cultural background. As a result, the converts have to live in two worlds, balancing one against the other and belonging to neither. Mohanty is critical of the conversion of faith, carried out among the impoverished adivasis. It uprooted them from their cultural milieu and orphaned them in their own land. It made them outsiders in the communities. Nor did the new faith give them solace in need either. The following situation, in which the Domb thieves come to pay respects and confess before Dadi Budha, is illustrative:

> At midnight a group of thieves came to Dadi Budha’s mound and whispered to him: Oh Almighty Dadi Budha, believe us. We are not wicked at heart. We shall tell you the truth. It is our poverty that has driven us to steal someone’s cow from his cowshed or a couple of plates from someone else’s house. We take such risks only for our family. But these inspectors these heretics they don’t believe in you. How can they understand our misfortune? You alone know it, lord. (37)

Mohanty also writes about the conditions and compulsions of the preachers of the alien faith in the tribal region:

> In the scorching heat the missionaries in black coats moved from one village to another preaching the message of Christianity. They sweated profusely, and their feet were blistered. Whenever they came across someone they would preach to him the message of their religion: Have faith in God, the Almighty, who sent his favorite son to wipe out the evil from the earth; have faith in Him alone. (36)
It is pathetic that the preachers are instructed by their sahib that they have to preach in any weather, and under any conditions, otherwise they will not get their salaries. Colonial rule turned religion, a matter of deep faith and conviction, into a means of livelihood, and of conquering. For many converts preaching became a job to save themselves from hunger. Referring to the guidance the adivasi religion gives in everyday life, Mohanty remarks that any faith that does not help its followers navigate the practical world becomes useless to them. He firmly believed in the power of religion not only to sustain spiritually but also to guide one's practical life. Adivasi religion offers one the space and the means to recover oneself in misfortune and get on with life, as shown in the case of Ram Muduli and Dishari. But the Christianity that was preached to save the tribal from his sins and superstitions could not save him from the exploitative system that the colonial government imposed on the tribals. Mohanty writes that the new and alien religion answers neither their spiritual nor their practical needs. He points it out:

The formless heavenly God carried the burden of all our sins— that is fine. That was a piece of good news. He could forgive all of us. (36) But faith alone would not do. One had to repent and confess his or her crime. But what was the value of Reverend Solomon's preachings in courts, in society and practical life? No missionary could save you when things got complicated. (36)

**The Relevance and the Cynicism of Introducing Christianity into Adivasi Culture:**

In their mission to discredit other religions as dark and superstitious, and propagate their own religion, the Christian missionaries did not care to try to understand the tribals' worldview and their subtle cosmology that sustained them from primeval times. They did not see that Christianity and its basic concepts— particularly that of the Original Sin— went against the unique cultural experiences and the cosmology of adivasis that evolved in consonance with the spirit of their natural landscape. The adivasis, whose vibrant culture celebrated lives attuned to nature, did not need any salvation, nor any redemption from any original sin. The missionaries' misplaced zeal to spread their religion in culturally rich tribal areas can be seen to be plainly imperceptive, irrelevant and cynical for two reasons. First, the local Christian priests preached that the scriptures declared that all humans were sinners, the son of God died for them and his blood would purify their sins. This concept of Christian cosmology was evolved by a culture which was guilty of the Original Sin of abandoning Innocence and Faith and tasting Knowledge, and falling from Grace into Time, rational knowledge and self-conscious civilization. Universalizing such a culture-specific concept and preaching it indiscriminately to a pristine, pre-reflective unself-conscious people, who were guided in their lives not by discursive knowledge of the world but by mythical thinking and an intuitive sense of their primal union with nature, was culturally supremacist and covertly political. Because of their own sense of cultural superiority, they failed to realize that the tribals never suffered what the Christian civilization was guilty of: the loss of Primal Innocence and the consequent radical disjunction between nature and culture. The tribals perceived themselves to be one with Nature, and their intuitive practices and rituals kept their communion with nature unbroken. In a metaphorical sense, they never lost paradise. But the missionaries could not see all this. They just launched their campaign to 'save' the adivasis, simply imposing their own 'enlightened' concepts on them, to colonize their imagination.

Secondly, exploiting the adivasis' helpless, impoverished conditions to preach to them to convert to 'save their souls' was cynical and unethical. It was motivated not by compassion, but by a cynical opportunism to spread their religion by working in close alliance with the colonial government, whose rule had disenfranchised the tribals in the first place, and thus prepared the ground for the 'charitable' work of the missionaries. Before colonialism, the adivasis led a simple, independent, contented lives, with a vibrant culture. The forest laws enacted by the colonial rulers deprived adivasis of their rights of the forest and the prohibition from entering the forests made them look and feel like thieves and law-breakers in their own lands. In these impoverished circumstances, the new faith entered the adivasi community as a benefactor by offering financial support in difficult times. As a result, the new faith among the adivasis

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remained superficial, and whenever the new converts needed solace and comfort, they went back to their native gods. Santosh Kumari comes to pray to Dadi Budha to fulfill her desire to marry Thenga Jani. When the village is threatened by the man-eating tiger, all the Christian-convert Dombs believe and listen to Dadi Budha's command and leave the village.

**Eleo, the unknowing perpetrator:**

Among the Dombs, Eleo stands out by his intelligence and shrewdness. He belongs to the first converts to Christianity in that area. He is respected by the headman, Ram Muduli, who often comes to take his advice. Though he is a Domb, he deals with the headman on equal terms, and commands respect, not just because of his age but also because of his sagacity. Mohanty writes,

> "(h)e would listen attentively to the questions put to him and would reply only after thought. In serious matters, Ram Muduli, the headman consulted him secretly. In the presence of others, he would disagree with him and laugh at his words. However, adding a little to what Eleo had said, he would say almost the same thing." (25)

Eleo is an active member among the converts, conducts prayers and collects levy (contribution to church) from Christian farmers and maintains those accounts. He talks with officials and is familiar with the shahibs and the courthouse. He knows the ways of the officials and how to deal with them. When Santosh Kumari elopes with Thenga Jani, the headman's son, Eleo secretly hopes that it could lead to the village gradually converting to Christianity.

Though Eleo seems to have a positive presence in the novel, it is through his dogmatism as a Christian convert that Mohanty indicates, right at the beginning of the novel, what kind of civilization has besieged the pristine Paraja culture. Eleo and the Parajas, Ram Muduli and Hari Jani, are watching the wildfire on the hill. Even as the Parajas are watching in admiration the beauty of the wildfire, and wondering who causes it and its spread to the far corners of the forest, Eleo readily gives his rational explanation that humans must have lit the fires, rashly adding his disdain for the Parajas’ "stupid" belief that **dimas** or the spirits of Ancestors cause the fire as the Creator-Beings. The unprovokedness of Eleo's dismissal of the Parajas' intuitive mythic thinking is ominous as the fact that he hastens to give a rational, empirical explanation to a magical spectacle. After converting to Christianity, Eleo sees Paraja religion through the eyes of the Christian pastor, 'who has read out many books to the converts' in his mission to discredit tribal beliefs. Eleo is impressed with the pastor's rational explanations and his campaign to spread 'real knowledge' among the tribals to save them from 'superstitious' beliefs. Eleo confidently lays out his logical argument with 'clarity', trashing Ram Muduli’s acceptance of belief in their traditional intuitive cosmological vision. For Eleo, empirical explanation takes precedence over intuitive vision and emotional experience. His unseemly castigation is symptomatic of a worldview, which, with its faith in rational explanations and analytical reasoning, privileges a rational account of the world and rubbishes tribal mythic thinking. This alien worldview, planted in Eleo by the Christian pastor, derives ultimately from Christian cosmology, which separates man from nature and gives him dominion over it. Historically, this led to a radical disjunction between nature and culture, between the human world and the cosmos. From his privileged position, the Western man proceeded to 'domesticate' nature by 'explaining' it, unknowing of its dangerous limitations or consequences. In this context, Wittgenstein's illuminating remarks about the wisdom of mythic thinking and the deluding nature of scientific explanations of the world, as quoted by Iain McGilchrist in his book *The Master And His Emissary*, are pertinent:

Wittgenstein saw greater wisdom in mythic than in scientific accounts of the world, which 'leave us with the distinct impression that everything has been accounted for; they give us the illusion of explaining a world that we might do better to wonder at ... Wittgenstein criticizes explanation in order to make way for wonder. Clarity for him was largely in the service of awe; his critical energies were directed at unmasking what he saw as the pseudo-explanations that tend to *come between us and the world*. [italics mine] blinding us to the
The man-apart-from-nature, dichotomized world view has had devastating consequences for both
nature and mankind. Man has suffered a profound spiritual desolation as nature was deprived of its sanctity
as mankind’s original setting and context, and was reduced to an object and subjected to systematization,
clarification and exploitation. Such a world view served the imperialists well in their exploitation of people
and nature. In her book, *The Sorcery of Colour*, Elisa Larkin Nascimento sums up the political nature of
Western knowledge: “The building of knowledge in Western civilization was largely the search for power
over nature and over other human beings who were considered part of nature and therefore to be submitted
to the control of knowledge.”(1)

In stark contrast, Ram Muduli’s relation with nature is one of primordial participation. For him,
nature is the very ‘ground of being’. He is annoyed when Eleo’s rationality desacralizes and speaks of nature
as an object that can be explained. By rejecting the tribal belief in dumas and their causation of natural
phenomena, Eleo is actually denying the tribal’s vision of humans’ involvement in the creation of the
world, and hence, their ethical obligation towards its care. Eleo’s rationality is divorced from cosmology. It
precludes a wider perspective that perceives nature as the context of man’s spiritual experience of unity.
The British poet William Scammel’s insightful observation about primitive tribes’ fundamental relation
with nature throws light on this aspect, from a different angle:

> For the earliest men and women, and perhaps for some remote tribes still today, nature was
not so much an environment … as the ground of being. Consequently ideas of appreciating,
loving, conserving or exploiting it hardly arose. It was simply there, omnipresent and all-
powerful, to be propitiated, thanked, obeyed, and co-operated with.(49)

Ram Muduli’s cosmological vision reveres and celebrates humans’ participatory kinship with
nature. For him, nature is animate with the spirits of ancestors and everything is interconnected. Unlike the
borrowed knowledge of Eleo, the intuitive faith and belief of Ram Muduli relate him immediately and
most intimately to the world. His morally inspired mythic thinking entails humans’ mutually responsible
ethical kinship with nature. It is hardly surprising that, with such cosmological vision, the tribes have been
the best custodians of nature. The rational knowledge of nature that Eleo naively upholds has sadly led to
catastrophic ecological consequences.

At another level, it is a tragic irony that the tribal Eleo has been led to commit the original sin of
eating the fruit of knowledge and breaking his primal unity with nature. He consciously stands back from
nature and makes it an object of discursive knowledge. His objectification of nature distances him from the
immediacy of the experience of the world. He has been indoctrinated into a modern consciousness towards
nature which collapses a more primitive and unconscious vital intimacy between man and nature. Highly
impressed with the authoritative figure of the pastor, Eleo, unfortunately, cannot see the dangerous
limitation of the knowledge the pastor is spreading. It is epistemologically dualist, being premised on a
division the separation of the subject from the object of study, or, in other words, the separation of man
from nature, with all its ramifications. In contrast, Ram Muduli can perceive, in his tribal visionary
wisdom, the interconnectedness of all things. Amazingly, this aspect of tribes’ intuitive perception of the
unity of all things is strikingly similar to the findings of the science of quantum mechanics. Writing about
Australian Aborigines’ epistemology, the eminent Harvard anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis says:

> The observation made by both Bohr and Heisenberg that one cannot draw a dividing line
between the observer and the observed is fully endorsed by the Aborigines. They imagine a
world that was sung into existence by Ancestors and continues to need this maintenance.
But in their identification with the land, they are at once objects and subjects, the singers
and the song.(202)

**Santosh Kumari: Intrusion of individualism into adivasiculture:**

Eleo and Santosh Kumari present the two faces of the threat posed to the Paraja culture by the
combined forces of colonialism and Christianity. While Eleo mounts an attack on the tribal beliefs, Santosh Kumari's individualistic pursuits strike at the very root of the tribal order and solidarity. She violates tribal ethos herself and tempts Thenga to break away from his community. Her own seduction by the 'intoxicating' glamour of urban life and the exciting prospect of freedom with which it lures her lead the unsuspecting couple out into the corrupt world of exploitation of the innocent. In his candid portrait of Santosh Kumari, Mohanty shows that her perceptions and actions are shaped by a unique conflation of circumstances such as the inferior status of the Dombs as a criminal tribe, their conversion to Christianity, the sensual pleasures and the attention she gets when she goes to church in the city, and her own clever, lively and vivacious nature.

She has no partner in her own community. The few young Domb men Beniamini who never shaved nor washed his face, Man, an ugly man and Simon with the bulging stomach are not attractive to her. Because of the inferior status of the Dombs, Santosh Kumari does not get the attention that a tribal girl usually gets. So for Santosh Kumari the forest is a desert where people have to work all the time, and the town, Koraput, is the place of her dreams and holds great attraction. She can enjoy herself there and can go after experiences. In the forest, the Paraja girls, the children of Dadi Budha, keep waiting and hoping for the fulfillment of their desires, but Santosh Kumari "had not learnt... to wait and expect things to happen". (20) After learning to enjoy many experiences and comforts in the city and observing its ways and means, she had come to realize that no one in this world waited for anyone else." (20)

Santosh Kumari is attracted to Thenga Jani, the headman's son, but her inferior social position is an obstacle to her love. So, she deliberately tempts him and plays on his passion. However, it cannot be said that her motives are entirely dark. She does not enjoy the freedom that a Paraja girl has. In Paraja community, men and women are free to express their desires and have the freedom to choose their partner. Santosh Kumari's helpless situation is similar to that of Sonadei of Amritara Santana, a Domb woman, who had bitter experiences with the local police and an unfortunate marriage to an impotent man. Women in the Domb families did not have any option in getting even the bare minimum of security for their lives. The enticement by Santosh Kumari points out not only the vulnerable position of the Domb women but also the miserable life of the Dombs in general, directly caused by the British policies of CTA, forest laws and the supplanting of adivasi religious beliefs with Christianity. This complicated, inescapable situation sets the stage for the disintegration of the tribal ethos and life.

In his nuanced portrait of Santosh Kumari, Mohanty makes a subtle reference to her discarding of the tribal trait of waiting. Unlike Sariya Daan, who patiently waits for Thenga to realize and respond to her love, Santosh Kumari grabs the chance to seduce him and take him away from her. The trait of waiting, which preserves the order and solidarity of the community by making the individual check themselves from becoming too assertive and putting themselves before others, has no use for her. Her exposure to Christianity and the experiences she enjoyed in the city encouraged individualism in her to go after her own pleasures without caring about communal mores. Colonialism, which promoted individual aspirations and individual enterprise to the detriment of the integrity of the native communities, encouraged the growth of cities, which offered individualized many experiences. With Christianity having discredited her tribal beliefs, and the urban life seducing her to go against tribal ethos, Santosh Kumari deliberately seduces Thenga, who struggles in vain to resist her and be loyal to his own community. Their elopement damages the moral fiber of the tribe. Sadly, Santosh Kumari becomes an Eve, who seduces Thenga, and becomes an instrument in the disintegration that befalls the Paraja community of Lulla.

The Ancestor raises serious questions about the motives and effects of introducing Christianity into culturally rich tribal regions. The Christian characters, the Dombs, are not malicious, but only vulnerable. They are victims of a larger reality of discrimination/marginalization under colonialism. Mohanty shows that in their own world, the tribals are guided by their religion in negotiating the odds of life, as can be seen in the lives of both the Parajas and the Dombs. Their rituals and festivals provide a bond between the

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individual and the community. As shown in the novel, the community takes responsibility for Ram Muduli’s well-being in his difficult times by helping him to recover and reconcile himself to the changed circumstances. Like the old Dishari, he too gets on with life. In contrast, the Dombs, with their situation having deteriorated under the colonial rule, and their Christianity not giving solace, live in limbo, experiencing emotional emptiness.

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