

A Nomadic Woman's Journey Towards Liberation: A Study of

Anukriti Upadhyay's *Bhaunri*.

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Abstract: India is the country of multiple cultures, races, castes, creeds and tribes. All of these constitute the diachronic history of India. Indian women have a notable contribution in its making. Tribal women of India stand much higher than the mainstream women of society. The fact becomes evident through the portrayal of character Bhaunri in Anukriti Upadhyay's novel *Bhaunri* (2019). Upadhyay's Bhaunri belongs to Ghauliya Lohar tribe, a nomadic tribe of Rajasthan. Even after being a third world oriental woman, she knows her basic human rights and has enough courage to fight for it. She appears as a voiced and liberated woman of triply oppressed society by mainstream men, women and tribal men.

Hence, the current paper aims to revisit and critique Spivak's idea that a subaltern cannot speak through the study of various nomadic tribal woman characters of Anukriti Upadhyay's novel *Bhaunri*.

Keywords: Subaltern, Nomadic, Third World, Oriental, Tribal Women.

India is the place of diverse people, cultures customs and environment. Various tribes in India have played a significant role in unifying the country with such diversity. These indigenous colours of India have and attempt to come to the forefront, revisiting and retrieving their dense diachronic history. They mark themselves distinct to the other people by showcasing their strengthened identity, their own language, culture and customs.

Wider research on the tribes of India is evident in the fact that there are more than five hundred local tribes of India which comprises almost 9% of the total population. The last decade has witnessed the rise of these tribal movements and various other ethnic groups. They have turned up as a collaborative force like never before and raised their issues and demands which could never have been understood by the conventional, political and social idioms. The emergence of tribal literature in India and various other parts of the world is the result of the agitation of tribal against their subversion to the mainstream community.

The word 'tribe' has been derived from the Latin word, "tribua" which initially referred to a political unit and later emerged as a particular community occupying a territory. Although, there no particular definition of the tribe in anthropology, the *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* defines tribe as: "...bound together by kin and duty and associated with a particular territory. Members of a tribe share the social cohesion associated with the family, together with the sense of political autonomy of a nation." (769) In contemporary times the word "tribe" is used to describe the varied communities dispersed in all over the world, called by UN authorities of Human Rights as "aboriginal people" or "indigenous people".

In the hitherto period, Gender disparity has manifested itself in different sects of society. Such condition of women today's time is a testimony to the fast-eroding idea of human security in a globalised world, which originates from the patriarchal power structure existing in the society. Tribal women, who belong to the lower economic and social conditions stands much higher to the women of mainstream society. They are a step behind in terms of education, economic and social rights but they are seen very vocal and outward in terms of their female identity and subjectivity. This paper seeks to analyze the liberation of tribal women who are merely educated but they are very much aware of feminine identity and retaliate in the protection of their rights through the analytical study of Anukriti Upadhyay's novel *Bhaunri* (2019).

Anukriti Upadhyay is a Rajasthani writer who has presented the glimpse of various tribes of Rajasthan through her novels *Daura* and *Bhaunri*. Her novels are set in the rustic area of Rajasthan. They are geographically and culturally very rich. Her novel *Bhaunri* posits the lifestyle of the Rajasthani nomadic tribe Gaduliya Lohars, who are known to be connected with Maharana Pratap, the royal king of Mewad. The folklores of Rajasthan convey that, after the defeat of the king, these Lohars followed their king into their nomadic existence. As the king lost his land, they swore not to settle their abode either.

Gaduliya Lohar also called Gadia Lohar, are found in the tribal regions of Rajasthan. They are nomads who work as ironsmiths. They move on their bullock carts from one place to another. Their existence is shrouded in the legendry story of Maharana Pratap which makes them different from the other tribal communities of Rajasthan.

Upadhyay's *Bhaunri* is set in splendid desert landscapes of Rajasthan. The novel is rich in the culture of Rajasthan, most specifically the culture and customs of tribal communities and nomads. The story revolves around *Bhaunri*, a Lohar woman, who is beautiful and fierce. She lives her life on her own terms and follows her heart. She is brought up by an equally ferocious woman, her mother who bids her farewell for her bridal home with the words: "I did not stay with a man who did not please me. If hearts don't meet, bodies are but fleshly houses of sin." (Upadhyay 18). *Bhaunri* is married to a handsome Lohar Bheema. *Bhaunri* loves her with all her heart but she fails to get love from Bheema, who is known to do merry-making with all the prostitutes of the village and also has a woman outside his house. *Bhaunri*, till the end of the novel, struggles for her right as a wife. She tries the best for the reciprocation of love for Bheema. When she fails to do it, she comes with a third way out, in the rage to protect her right as a wife of Bheema.

The condition of a woman has been almost the same in every section of the society. They have been subjugated by the patriarchal society. Patriarchy, which is a part of the collective unconscious of the people in the world, has always tried to rule upon women in order to establish their power in society. Beginning from western mythical character Eve to Indian mythological Sita; from Hardy's *Tess* to R.K Naryan's *Savitri*, the woman has been a subject of oppression for man to express and enjoy their superior gender in the society.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a postcolonial feminist in her essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak' (1985) calls a woman a 'subaltern'. She borrows this term from Antonio Gramsci who has defined the term as the marginal group of the society who are devoid of voicing their opinions in the mainstream society. A postcolonial theorist Edward Said in his seminal text *Orientalism* (1978) brings in the idea of third world subaltern native and the continuous efforts of R=Eurocentric world to dominate them. The postcolonial critic Homi K Bhabha highlighted the importance of power relations in explaining the subaltern groups as suppressed. In this continuum, Spivak calls women, a subaltern as they have always been dominated, overruled and muted in the society. Through her essay, she brings in the anecdote of a Bengali woman, who has to commit suicide because she dared "speaking" outside normal patriarchal channels where she was supposed to be silent. At the end of her essay, Spivak proclaims: "The Subaltern cannot speak". She further adds to it:

"There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with flourish".(Spivak, 104)

The paper criticises Spivak's idea where she claims that subaltern cannot speak. The protagonist of the novel Bhaunri, who is triple-marginal, firstly, their world citizen, secondly, a woman and thirdly a tribal appears as strong, brave and courageous woman who voice-up for herself against the domination of her husband and retaliate to his oppression like a fighter.

Her exploitation begins as a very basic level where she has been objectified by the men at her in-law's house. Her father-in-law says at the first time he sees her "When did you get breasts round like a kumhar's pot and a waist width of my hand. If I had known, I would not have matched you with Bheema" Objectification of a woman thrown so casually in a house like it was nothing. It doesn't make the readers wonder it was a questionable thing at all. The sexual tension between Bhaunri and her father-in-law was noted several times in the novella which was initially from the side of her father-in-law. She considered her not the wife of his son but also a bait to satisfy his own lust for the body of a woman.

She has been put down not only by the men of her family but women too. When she questions her mother-in-law regarding the behaviour of Bheema, she asks her to be silent and not

indulge herself into such queries as women are not supposed to be. She says: “A woman’s place is in the rasoda (kitchen) and that’s where she ought to live and die” (44) It shows how patriarchy got penetrated in the heads of women so deep that they have started to believe that it’s their fate, not oppression. She has no opposition or rather she feels it’s useless to oppose it. It doesn’t value much anymore to her as she spent her own life enduring and it might just carry on like this with Bhaunri too. But Bhaunri doesn’t conventionally react to this. When she starts to spy her husband her mother-in-law articulates: “Chhori, do not talk like this...It is better for the body to endure than for the heart to be snared. It only brings more suffering”. The given lines came from a person who has given up all her will and accepted the fate which her husband has set for her. It seems as if her voice has been muffled by the patriarchal system which has been so dense in the society that humans have stopped to believe that they have their own desires, aspirations and dreams. She advises her the same thing.

The other example of the pain and suffering endured by women comes up, when Mai compares the fate of women with a pregnant cow in her labour pain. She says: “A woman’s lot is always a pain”. (75) Even though this line is used in the context of their cow’s delivering a calf but it still resonates well because Bhaunri’s mother-in-law said, probably juxtaposing her own sufferings and pain she endured her own life. She only sees that women are born to just endure because that what have been her entire life so far.

Women suffer throughout in the novel as they have always been bearing as the literature of every century depicts. What makes the novel peculiar from all is the depiction of an oriental woman who is fearless, fierce and goes against the world for her rights and happiness. She acquires such fearlessness from her mother who, at one point of time runs out of the marriage because of a lousy husband. She marries Bhaunri’s father. Bhaunri has always been taught by her mother to pursue her happiness and free will. She falls in love with Bheema and Bheema’s physical attraction towards her makes her believe that. When Bhaunri discovers her affair with someone else, she is left heartbroken. She gathers herself to make each and every effort to win the love Bheema at first. She bravely argues her monstrous father-in-law:

“You advise me, father-in-law, but what about him? Is a man taught about the kind of love that keeps a woman, that makes her eyes droop, not because she wishes to please him, but she is pleased in her heart? Do men only know the knot kind of love, spurious

like a gilt ornament, which only pleases the eye for a few days? Not the real kundan which shines brighter as time passes? Don't teach me about love, father-in-law. What do you know about it? Your wife trembles at your footstep. That is not love. Love doesn't fear anything, it doesn't even fear losing love itself" (104)

She is fearless, not just about giving a moral lesson but how the society tries to suppress every immoral act of a man just for the sake that it is something done by a man while woman has to face the consequences of the crimes that even they didn't commit. It shows an incredible inequality faced by one gender and it has been bottled up. She talks about love but she has caught herself in love with her husband and she doesn't bear even the idea of her husband spending nights with any other women. She specifically posits that "Love doesn't fear anything" (104) she uses the word 'fear' because everything revolving around a women which is hindering them to show their own worth is stopped at the cliff of fear. 'Fear' for them is like a barrier. That's why she makes sure, even if women are hindered by the fear but love isn't. She can go up to any extent to make it right if she is in love.

Bhaunri doesn't believe the philosophy what her mother-in-law lives in, she opposes it but at the same time, she feels bad for her for what she has to suffer because of her father-in-law. She says: "Aren't some things beyond bearing, Mai? But love is bigger than the biggest trouble it causes. You should believe that. That is the only way to bear the unbearable". (135) She realizes that her Mai spent her entire life believing into that, it has been in her fate and agrees to carry on. She tries to give hope to her mother-in-law that everything doesn't have to be bear by women. They don't have to. They're not supposed to. They deserve the same amount of respect what men do. Love, conquers the differences have arrived between men and women in patriarchal society. Love doesn't mean bearing but certainly bigger than the troubles caused by the patriarchal system.

In the end when Bhaunri couldn't find any way to deal with Bheema, she paralyses with the martial art move she has learnt from her father-in-law to teach him the lesson of her deception. She takes the revenge of her suffering and forbids Bheema to do the same with other women. Bhaunri echoes of Tess, one of the great woman protagonists of English Literature created by Hardy in his classic *Tess of the D'urbervilles*. Both the stories depict the same portrayal of the patriarchal societies even the geographical locations of the plot set are different.

Both the tales work-based as Hardy proclaims “Reward to the virtues, punishment to the vice”. Tess tries her best to handle every situation with grace and vulnerability but still finds herself in chaotically wrong circumstances which she never wishes for. The same things are seen happening with Bhaunri in the novel *Bhaunri*. When she was trying her best to keep her husband away from the girl he was cheating on her. She has been seen as a culprit by Bheema and was beaten up by him. Both the leading characters in both of the novels were struggling at their best to survive and fight against the injustice in a way but facing obstacles.

We reckon both the stories based on the problematic ideal that is “Men are free from all taboos and restrictions” . Alec committed several sins from trying to seduce her to ruin her entire life, but he was never bad in society’s eyes. He was living peacefully in his huge mansion and still not very much bothered about it. The same thing is noticed with Bhaunri’s husband, where he was beating his wife Bhaunri, having an affair and using his anger to suppress others but still he wasn’t facing any sort of restrictions, neither from his own family to the village he was living in. It shows that men were always privileged in society’s eyes and they are not bounded by any taboos. They are the one who started it and made women to follow. They did it not for ensuring to maintain the “purity” in the society but having control over another gender to easily. Even though there plenty of aspects which might be similar in both stories but Tess and Bhaunri can be different personalities altogether. While, Tess, an English woman was more like a recessive one with usually blaming herself for every wrong happening to her, Bhaunri, a ‘third world’ tribal orient still tries to give best it takes every time she was told by her in-laws that she can’t do anything about her husband. She was always willing to give it back to the very second which shows a very confident, courageous and outspoken trait of hers.

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