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Negotiating Identity: Tradition, Culture and the Female Experience in *Becoming Me*

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Abstract

Rejina Marandi's novel Becoming Me is a reflective narrative that traces the journey of a young woman as she grapples with the intricate issues of identity, belonging and self-realisation within a society rich in culture and complexity. This paper scrutinizes the text through feminist and postcolonial theoretical frameworks, focusing on the protagonist's shifting understanding of herself amidst family pressures, societal expectations, and inner turmoil. Marandi skillfully weaves a storyline that links individual development to broader sociocultural insights, particularly highlighting how gender, ethnicity, and customs intersect in defining the female experience. This paper examines how Becoming Me conveys the quiet challenges and hidden strengths of women striving to balance the contrasts between tradition and modernity. The protagonist emerges as a symbol of resistance and negotiation, revealing that identity is a dynamic process rather than a fixed concept. The analysis delves into the text's thematic richness, narrative style and symbolic features that highlight the protagonist's evolution from compliance to empowerment.
Keywords: Identity, Postcolonial, Ethnicity, Feminism, Culture.

Introduction

India's tribal people have been instrumental in preserving our nation's rich cultural legacy. Through a number of programs run by Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, their contributions to the independence movement have been brought to light. The 2011 consensus estimated that there were 104 million tribal people in India, making about 8.6% of the total population. It is often known that the tribal population has played a vital role in the development of India's story, whether through their involvement in the fight for independence, in sports, or in business. Under the auspices of Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, November 15, Birsa Munda's birth anniversary, has been designated as Janjatiya Gaurav Diwas in honour of the unique contribution made by tribal people to India's independence and changing future. Urbanisation is posing a growing threat to the distinctive characteristics of tribal identity. Language and dialects affected by insufficient exposure and occasional non-practice. This research paper examines the social and cultural identity of the tribal women especially Santhal tribe through the narration of Rejina Marandi's *Becoming Me*.

Representation of Tribal People in Postcolonial India:

The concept of exceptionalism also supported the assumption that “tribes” were a unique and vulnerable group of Indians who needed special laws from the state to protect them. These laws, which were first proposed by the British colonial state and then contested and supported by rival interest groups, were reiterated in post-independence India’s constitution. The state’s development program has rekindled discussions on tribal/Adivasi subjectivity. The state actively works to popularise and promote its own portrayal of various groups and their interactions with one another, even as state policies are formulated based on presumptions and understandings of such communities. The various identities and contentious classifications that have been imposed upon and adopted by “tribal” communities since colonial times have been influenced by these various interpretations. The colonial creation of an Indian “tribe” is a topic of intense scholarly discussion today. Others emphasise the role of indigenous agency in this regard, arguing that in addition to European notions of race, the colonial discourse on the tribe in India was also influenced by prevailing concepts and values among dominant caste groups within India. Some scholars contend that the colonial state’s “legitimising ideology” included the identification of sections of the conquered populations as “tribe” and caste.

Discussion

Being a fictitious extension of the author herself, Liya, the novel’s protagonist and narrator, finds it very difficult to trust and make friends with her diku classmates because they seem to be from hostile backgrounds. She waits till Sinu, her diku companion, takes the first taste of the dish before accepting it, unsure if it is safe to consume. This distrust and worry are a reflection of the Santhals’ ongoing state of uncertainty and concern for their safety and well-being, which perpetuates a state of crisis. The Santhal tribe, which is found in eastern states including Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal, is the third largest in India, according to the 2011 census. This study investigates the revival of Santhal’s identity from the viewpoint of the locals, drawing on important ideas from Martin Nakata, Ramnika Gupta, and G. N. Devy. In order to acknowledge their presence in India, it also discusses the concept of power. The protagonist Liya’s struggles, goals, and experiences as a young Santhal girl in the public domain-school, college, market, etc. -are revealed in Marandi’s story. It demonstrates the community’s fight for political and social rights in order to comprehend their true Indigenous identity. The heart of the various narratives of the peripheral civilisation, which have their own stories, myths, and lifestyles to share with others, is reinforced by alternative historical accounts. The study examines the tribe’s situation from the perspective of marginalised elements and their cultural status, which is taken for granted by the majority. By doing this, the viewpoint of the Santhal tribe challenges the concept of mainstream. The Adivasis, who are thought to have been the first people to live in the Indian subcontinent, have long been relegated to the periphery of society. Geospatial isolation and religious-linguistic divisions have been the main characteristics of their remote and distinctive way of life. Furthermore, these indigenous people stood out as the constant “other” to both the colonial rulers and mainstream Indian society due to their disengagement from contemporary perspectives and ideals. The politics of identification and belonging are more intense and multi-layered in Northeast India due to its multi-ethnic nature, making the issues surrounding Adivasi identity and existence even more complex and nuanced. The region’s “indigenous/outsider” binary has been strengthened by the politicisation of ethnicity by ethnic communities as a form of “resistance,” which frequently leads to pervasive and complex violence.

The 1993–1994 Bodo–Adivasi ethnic conflicts in the Lower Assamese region known as the Bodoland Territorial Area District (BTAD) are mentioned at the beginning of the book. These ethnic conflicts, which kept happening, caused hundreds of thousands of Santhal and Bodo people

to be uprooted from their villages and killed thousands of Santhal. The premise of the book is centred on these frequent conflicts, and Marandi attests to the horrors and various types of violence that Santhals encounter. The cruel and horrifying violence committed against the Santhals in the four districts of Bodoland and other tribally ruled places is also depicted in this book. According to Marandi, there have been cases of girls and women being raped and killed, Adivasi villages being completely destroyed by fire, and individuals being shot and killed in broad daylight. These incidents highlight the precarious situation of Adivasi life and their tremendous vulnerability, which is made worse by the disintegration of the legal system that is supposed to protect their basic rights to life and property. The rioters killed an Adivasi leader's four-year-old son after murdering his father and two allies because of the ferocity of the hatred they fostered against the Santhal.

Summation

Thus, the novel painstakingly highlights the pervasive prejudice against Adivasis, which is primarily driven by the region's hegemonic identity politics and results in an exclusionary politics that favours separating the “outsider”—those who do not fit into the majoritarian sociocultural discourse. As a result, Liya and other Adivasis are continuously reminded of their status and the sociocultural disparities that still exist. Liya's landlady's scepticism of her eating habits and family occupation, or the fact that she was made fun of at college for being an Adivasi, highlights how they are continuously scrutinised and judged, which furthers their social marginalisation and denies them respect and social recognition. It is possible to understand the deliberate exclusion of the Adivasis from mainstream socio-cultural realms and the ongoing portrayal of them as the “other” as a result of a continuum of violence that is “cultural” in nature.

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