

**TRANSNATIONAL DISLOCATION AND GENDERED TRIBAL MARGINALITY
IN JAIWANTI DIMRI'S *TO SURJU, WITH LOVE***

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Abstract

*Tribal marginality is an issue related to socio-political empowerment in modern India, which becomes doubly complicated if seen from a gendered perspective. Spivak's idea of the 'doubly marginalized' tribal women finds a literary exposure in a recently published Anglophone novella authored by Jaiwanti Dimri. My paper chooses Dimri's transcreated novella *To Surju, With Love* (2017) as a case study in exploring the marginality of a dislocated tribal woman. Born in the Dumka region of Jharkhand, brought up in Mejjuri town of Assam and dislocated as a labourer in Bhutan, Dimri's female protagonist Sukurmani reflects the image of water hyacinth, floating aimlessly, in search of a secure and stable life in an unknown land. Through the depiction of Sukurmani's limited world view and limited vocabulary Dimri explores the uncharted regions of her suppressed, marginalized status and her single-handed struggle to bring up her children till her death. Her Memsaab, who is a single working woman, a college teacher on research assignment in Bhutan, becomes the keen observer of her plights as an illegal immigrant woman labourer and a single mother. My paper would attempt to explore how the author makes a comparison between the two different (feminine) world views (Sukurmani as a dislocated tribal subaltern and her employer the Memsaab as the representative of the educated and empowered mainstream Indian) outside the geopolitical border of the Indian nation-state to uphold the issue of gendered tribal marginality in diaspora.*

Keywords: Transnational dislocation, Tribal Marginality, Gender, Ethnicity, Identity

The Latin 'marginalis' is the etymological root of the word 'margin' which refers to an edge or border, and therefore, 'marginality' denotes the positionality of the border of any spatial reality. It paves the way for the binary or hierarchical relationship between centre and periphery. This binary gives birth to the notion of the 'marginalized'—"the groups or individuals that experience life on the fringes" and "are denied full access to opportunities and resources that are normally available to dominant groups" (Roberts 191). Often the centre becomes a desired position as the marginalized is always threatened that s/he is "absent, voiceless, or invisible" (Roberts 192). The reason behind their state of being in the margin is "due to their exclusion from political participation" (Perlman 98) in the system of governance

by powerful stakeholders and the majority, as well as their invisibility in the economic system of the society.

In India, along with the people of the main stream culture, can be found people of indigenous culture who are referred to as ‘Tribes’ in general. They are the earliest inhabitant or *adivasi*, whom the Government had marked as the Scheduled Tribes. After the independence, the Government of India has scheduled the tribal communities “in the constitution” and helped them with “special provisions for their welfare and development.” (Survey Report 1). But the lack of awareness of these government aids restricted their welfare. Again certain private and government initiation for industrial establishment robbed off their land ownership. As a result mass migration to other states and sometimes beyond the borders of the country for livelihood, can be witnessed among the tribes. This immigration status of the tribes becomes “one of the most insidious factors of vulnerability for marginalization and exploitation” (Mehretu et.al. 93). Along with it when the term ‘gender’ is added, the marginalization reaches its extremity.

Focusing on the above mentioned issues of marginality, tribal identity and gender, the present paper has chosen Jaiwanti Dimri’s recent novella- *To Surju, With Love* (2017) as case study. The author beautifully reminisces her two years (1997- 1999) stay in the Kanglung region of Eastern Bhutan, working under the Colombo Plan as a professional academician. Set in the beautiful panoramic vista of Bhutan, the novella is actually the heart rendering saga of the “disturbing submerged realities of the lives of the subaltern Indians” (SWL xi). Dimri introduces her protagonist Sukurmani and her tales to depict how class, economy, tribal identity, illegal migrant status and gender fixes the dislocated Indian labourers’ identity as a ‘subaltern’ and “virtually” situates them “on the margins of margins” (SWL xi). Ranajit Guha in the ‘Preface’ to the *Subaltern Studies Reader*, remarks that the word ‘subaltern’ “stands for the meaning... ‘of inferior rank’” and the “subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups” (vii).

We can find an epistolary flavour in the title of the novella, *To Surju, With Love*, but the narrative does not surround the eponymous character of Surju. Rather, it is centred on the life of his mother Sukurmani, who is a dislocated tribal subaltern labourer cum maid servant. We all know that the renowned critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak had once raised the question –“Can the Subaltern Speak?”. At this juncture I raise another question- ‘Who listens to the Subaltern?’ Here Dimri has portrayed a main stream female character of Memsaab who becomes the patient and ‘sahridaya’ listener of Sukurmani’s tale. Through a third person narration, the author is able to focus on Sukurmani’s limited worldview, the uncharted regions of her suppressed, marginalized status and her single-handed struggle to bring up her children till her death. She also presents Memsaab’s sympathetic acceptance of Sukurmani.

The hierarchical binary of the mainstream and the marginalized that is viewed in the socio-cultural scenario of India is somewhat different outside the geo-political borders. For

this the readers find out certain similarities between the two main characters on the basis of their Indian origin, common dislocated status and gender identity; and is also able to mark the emotional attachment, the blossoming sisterhood between the two. In spite of all these when Dimri portrays Memsaab as the representative of the educated and empowered mainstream Indian lady with legal documents in a foreign land; and presents Sukurmani as the tribal, subaltern woman with an illegal migrant status, working as the domestic maid of the Memsaab, the difference comes forward. Again when the author finds no reason to disclose the name of Memsaab—the very term that suggests her status as an employer; she discloses the name of her servant Sukurmani, who needs to be represented by some mainstream person.

In this novella the world of Sukurmani, her dreams and all her hopes develop around her four years old son Surju for whom she struggles with odds to gain a safe, secured and stable position. She works as a house maid at her Memsaab's place in the expatriate colony. A soft invisible bond forms between these two working women that enable us to know Sukurmani's tribal identity. Although she never surely declares which tribal community exactly she belonged to. While penning a letter to her father via Memsaab she tells that her father Sarju Tutu is a Bodo, and that they once stayed in Mejjuri, in the Darranga districts of Assam. But later on while talking about her various internal diasporic movements it gets evident that she is actually a Dumka tribe of Jharkhand. Her family moved to Kokrajhar as labourers and for a "tribal feud" (SWL 55) they again moved to Darranga, where her father first worked in the fields and later on started carrying water for the Bhutias.

Diasporic dislocation is always not willing. In case of Sukurmai, there were many layers of dislocation which are all forced. Unemployment, loss of land, low economic status, poverty, and internal problems meted out to Sukurmani and her husband by the relatives, the 'maramari', the 'himsha', all had forced her to move from Dumka to Kokrajhar to Bishalgarh to Darranga and ultimately to move beyond the borders of her 'des' to Bhutan. It is a known factor that a tribal woman has to negotiate both within and outside her community. For this when she arrives at Bhutan to earn some money and betterment and is harassed now and then by the migrant male labourers she shifts from Kurichu to Rungthung to Kunglung.

While interacting with Sukurmani, her Memsaab understands that there are many untold stories, many unsent letters and memories within her:

"How many such unheard, unwritten and undelivered letters were sealed inside Sukurmani? As if she was a letter box posted as a milestone on an uneven footpath at some remote spot, withstanding the vagaries of seasons, sometimes soaked in rain, sometimes blotched in the scorching sun, but disfigured and discoloured the letter box stood erect in its place". (SWL 6)

In this alien land, Memsaab, who defines her identity as- "Noun: woman; adjective: single; status: working; category: middle class" (SWL 49), when encounters women like Sukurmani, Norbo, Pratima – who are widow, motherless and fatherless respectively and who

either work as maids or labourer in some construction site—she realizes that the challenge of her safe, economically secured academic profession is nothing in front of what these women face—“Every morning arrived with new challenges” (SWL 39) to them. Memsaab also understands that their “vehicle of life moved on, even if nit speedily or steadily. It is these people with fractured families and broken human ties who were building the dams and bridges on rivers; sometimes they acted as the bridges between two nations” (SWL 33).

‘Gender’ is actually a process of creating division between people, “along the lines of ‘sexed identities’. The gendering process frequently involves creating hierarchies between the divisions it enacts” (Beasley 11). In India, if the tribal people in general are historically, politically, socio-culturally marginalized, then the tribal women are “doubly marginalized in the name of gender discrimination” (SWL 151). In Sukurmani’s narrative one can find random inscriptions of exploitation and harassment. She reveals that while working in Rungthung, a Bihari used to disturb her:

“There he *distubs* us a lot. He does not let the child sleep at night. Spends all my *peesas*. Drinks raasi... That *ssala* Bihari! ...Take away all my *peesas* also and say many many bad things about me everywhere.” (SWL 20; original emphases)

Even in Kanglung, her landlord, from her ‘des’ also becomes a threat to her. To provide Surju the security of a father, she stays with Basant (who is actually a Muslim called Latif). Although she honoured him the status of ‘Surju’s baba’, he “had fired the last shot” (SWL 69), leaving her pregnant, alone and taking away all her money. As Basant doesn’t take away his belongings Sukurmani believes that he would return. She also assures: “he comes if boy is born” (SWL 70). Towards the end of the novella Dimri shows how Sukurmani once again becomes victim of some Christian man who impregnates her, and to “get rid of the unwanted foetus in her womb”, she had devoured some poisonous herbs that “proved fatal” (SWL 97), taking away her life.

Here Dimri never forgets to talk about the migrant male labourers along with the women. She explains their “harsh living conditions” and with the overtones of sympathy her voice becomes ironical saying that their “physical needs had to be fulfilled and in the absence of their wives, co-women workers like Sukurmani became the soft targets” (SWL 24). Sukurmani becomes the representative of all tribal women, whose body become a site of oppression, generating in three levels- class, tribe and gender. The narratorial voice becomes critical of this situation:

“...the goat could be butchered if the circumstances so required. Sukurmani was just a dumping ground; what difference did it make if you threw a handful of garbage on it or the whole lot? Someone accused her of stealing three thousand rupees; someone more greedy or cunning added a foetus to her

uterus; the pile of garbage kept growing and rose into a mound so high that one day Sukurmani was buried alive under it” (SWL 45-46).

Sukurmani is becomes nostalgic when she talks about the people of her ‘des’, the way she and her husband made *raasi*, the Durga puja celebration, beating of drums, singing and dancing. For this she receives a sarcastic treatment from her Memsaab, who comments that “in her hour of need and crisis not a shadow of any of he own countrymen was ever visible around her, except for Surju” (SWL 12). But the day when Sukurmani’s landlord threatened her to turn out of the house and she seek a day’s shelter in her Memsaab’s store room, she was berated in turn with “an unfamiliar and unexpected terseness” (SWL 49) and was refused. Dimri craftily uses the narratorial voice here to question the “sisterly warmth in their relationship” (SWL 51). Although after this incident Memsaab was pricked by her guilty consciousness and wanted to pacify the situation. Her concern for Sukurmani becomes prominent as she gets worried about the harassments done to her. Mrs. Mitra, one of her neighbour who knows the Dumka Tribal woman of Jharkhand very well, informs her that “Dumka women do not have such inhibitions about their sexuality; they exult in it.” (SWL 62). The question arises can we regard Sukurmani’s sexual exploitations as rejoicing her sexuality? Or can we say that she is very much habituated in these activities? Rather we can say that she had chosen to stay with men not for her exultation but for a security of her son, for an identity, a work permit.

In Indian culture and literature the concept of motherhood is practised and portrayed vehemently. The mother is compared to nature for her role as a nurturer, for her being an icon of selfless love and sacrifice. The present novella also is a depiction of a mother, who with all her strength bears the tortures safeguarding her son. She wishes her son to get educated, to have legal documents, security, to gain an identity not of a labourer’s a son. But can the long practised hierarchical binary be effaced? Unlike Sukurmani, Memsaab, with her own world view analyses that:

“Every new generation has to bear the legacy of its ancestors; this is your legacy. This is the way of life. This is history. Today you inherit this destiny. Tomorrow Surju and the child in your womb will be the partakers of this destiny” (SWL 83)

It is true that Sukurmani, without any legal documents, work-permit has arrived in Bhutan to seek for a livelihood, some safety, shelter and the dreams to present her son Surju a stable future. Her narration reflects her confused state as sometimes she says she is Bodo, or Dumka or Santhal. She does not know what her country actually is? Is her ‘des’ India, or Mejjuri, Darranga, Bihar, Jharkhand? In order to hide her illegal migrant status to get a work permit, she conceals her name Hujunmoi and takes her dead sister’s name Sukurmani. Her vocabulary which is a wonderful and “rich and polyphonic mix of Bodo, Dumka, Hindi, English, Bengali, Nepali and the local Sharchopa” (SWL xvi) represents her acquired

hybridity from her multiple levels of dislocations within and beyond the borders of her country. It gets evident that she herself has no particular knowledge of her identity and she also is unaware that unknowingly she had assembled multiple identities of “poor, widow, single mother, illegal migrant, illiterate, ditched lover, maid servant” (SWL xii). Sukurmani is a person who cannot be bound by any fixed identity.

In her limited vocabulary we find the dominance of a particular word ‘*himsha*’, of which Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar, the reviewer of the novella and an eminent young Indian tribal novelist writing extensively on tribal life and cultures, observes: “This could either mean ‘violence’ or ‘jealousy’” (n.pag). But the word is actually “enigmatic, multi-dimensional, omnipresent” (SWL 11). With her limited worldview Sukurmani explores the deep philosophical meaning of ‘*himsha*’. To her, the root cause of all her problems, ailments, “conflict, woes, and sufferings”, (SWL 11) is ‘*himsha*, for which she had lost her husband, her family and has been dislocated from one place to other several times. She has always become a meek prey of ‘*himsha*’ till death.

Mahasweta Devi in an interview once said “Tribal woman have terrible resilience, terrible courage”. Sukurmani is no exception. For her will power and courage, in spite of facing such tremendous insurmountable calamities, she maintains her dignity till she breaths her last: “She had pride; she never begged for help and she never saw herself as hapless or helpless” (SWL 99). With her “heroic silence” she wins over the cacophony of the mainstream worldview and dares to dream.

Abbreviation used:

SWL= *To Surju, With Love*

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