CHAPTER-3

Palpable Subalternity: Reading the Marginalized Female Body

The modes of oppression women's bodies undergo are very diverse across different social parameters like caste and class. In the Indian context, while the upper-caste women are caged by Brahminical ideologies and patriarchy, the lower-caste and tribal women face challenges that are exclusive to their subaltern stature. To understand what specific forms of corporeal oppression women face in such marginalized spaces, it is urgent to read the gendered body politics relevant within such communities. It is important to adopt this intersectional feminist lens to highlight the heterogeneity in the bodily treatment of women in different communities. Such an approach renders a brilliant platform for analyzing how women's bodies are sites of anxiety and power imposition when placed at different hierarchical positions of the social spectrum. It also offers a space to engage with the question of how in communities where women are twice marginalized, experience tangible consequences of such marginalization through their bodies.

This chapter looks at how the subaltern identity of the female body endures and almost internalizes certain oppressive regimes that are facilitated by the hegemonic relations it shares with the dominating party. This chapter also questions whether the oppression of the subaltern female body is only performed by the external forces inflicted by upper-caste and upper-class men or whether it is also done by those from within their marginalized community. To carry out this analysis, the chapter takes into account the literary narratives from the select body of Assamese, Bengali, and Odia fiction by women. By studying these literary representations of how subalternity can impact female corporeality, the chapter also attempts to archive some of the lesser-known literature from the selected Eastern-Indian regions that depict remote tribes that are otherwise alien to the mainstream Indian public. One of the limitations of the primary resources for this chapter is the fact that though these narratives rescue the silencing around the bodily experiences of the subaltern women, most of these are written from an observant's perspective and not from someone who belongs to the community. One of the major texts selected for this chapter is Pratibha Ray's (2009) novel *The Primal Land* which revolves around the Bonda tribe of Odisha. While Ray's attempt to rescue the Bondas from the oblivion of collective public ignorance is widely acknowledged, the novel has faced some criticism in the regional literary circles,

charged with the allegation of being written by a privileged upper-caste writer with an outsider's imagination. The eponymous story of 'Draupadi' (2018) is also written by an upper-caste/class writer like Mahasweta Devi but focuses on a very pressing feminist issue that was hitherto absent in the discussions of Indian feminist spheres. Out of all the texts chosen for analysis in this chapter, only one short story comes from the pen of a Bengali Dalit writer but this fact doesn't certainly discount the urgency of the varying bodily issues that these texts posit. The efforts of the privileged women writers must be judged by the fact that they could lend a sympathetic voice to the women's bodies that navigate the cultural politics of these communities and which are silenced through generational and systematic oppression. Regardless of their backgrounds, these upper-caste and upper-class women writers from the Eastern-Indian region of Assam, Odia, and West Bengal wrote fiction portraying the bodily trauma and resistance of the subaltern female body and therefore, this chapter takes them into account while conducting its comparative analysis. Antonio Gramsci's (1971) idea of subalternity identifies how certain social groups are repressed by hegemonic relations and whose lived experiences are "rarely archived in historiography" (55).

Similarly, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) presents the subaltern as someone who has no history and is disenfranchised by the dominant social forces. Spivak (2010) posits that a woman dealing with such subalternity, i.e. a subaltern woman lives "more so deeply in shadows" (55). Interestingly, to rescue this shadowy figure of the subaltern woman, Spivak (2010) reads into the bodily trauma imposed through the practice of *Sati* (widow immolation) on women in India. She studies the body of the subaltern woman and the treatment it receives to retrieve the trials of subalternity that are erased in history. It shows how the female body of a subaltern figure acts as the site of resistance even when it endures oppression in submission. The female subaltern embodiment creates palpable evidence of hegemonic oppression that refuses to be silenced against any archival erasure. The shadowy figure of the subaltern woman, one who dwells in a marginalized community, faces bodily discrimination and abuse both within and outside the community. Thus, this chapter studies the interlinking ideas of gender, caste, and body politics, exploring how this triad functions in social contexts through specific literary representations. The chapter uses the term subaltern to identify tribal and lower-caste women whose narratives are often neglected in the dominant collective memory. The term is not strictly used to identify Dalit women's narratives but also is inclusive of the marginalized tribal woman who is often

oppressed because of her peripheral location in the social strata. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section describes the corporeal oppression that the literary characters of subaltern women suffer at the hands of external patriarchal forces in terms of hierarchical communal dominance and the second section discusses the modes of bodily trauma they face within the cultural setting of their community. It must be noted that all the texts are set in rural locations and the characters belong to a lower class as well, negotiating their socio-economic disadvantages. These socio-economic disadvantages that come with the caste and tribal identity also often lead to the female body being used as a tool of trade. The chapter discusses this aspect through two short stories such as Gayatri Sharaf's (2016) 'A Mother from Kalahandi' and 'The Ghat of the Date Palm Tree and Panchi's Sense Organs' by Saptadwipa Adhikari (2020). In both these plots, the subaltern female body is subjected to sexual abuse because of the socio-economic conditions that use it as a commodity in exchange for financial and social security. The chapter explores the various ways in which the female body is entrapped in its subalternity, suffers (s)exploitation, is ostracized, and gets its beauty defiled because of cultural customs, beliefs, superstitions, and external oppression in the following sections.

3.1. Bodily Subordination: Corporeal Oppression by the Privileged Dominant Outsider

The female body tends to become the site where all the stringent power dynamics are observed. The subaltern is a figure who is robbed of her history and her voice. The subjugation of the subaltern is functional because there is a powerful dominance of the upper-caste and upper-class patriarchy. However, Partha Chatterjee (1983) argues that to understand the subaltern as voiceless and devoid of any oppositional force would be to deny them a certain autonomy in their history. He points out that denying this autonomy by identifying the subaltern as deeply subjugated immobilizes their resistance and destroys their history. The subaltern woman who bears the brunt of her subalternity on her body, therefore, also resists with her tormented body. This is very well-represented in the popular short story by Mahasweta Devi (2018), 'Draupadi' translated from Bengali by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In 'Draupadi', Devi follows the life of a fugitive tribal woman Dopdi Mejhen who along with her husband Dulna are wanted by the military officials because of their alleged involvement in the Naxalite activities in her village, which resulted in the murder of an exploitative landowner. At the beginning of the story, Dulna is killed but

Dopdi does not submit due to that. She continues on her run, being underground, taking the help of the forest that has been the only benevolent giver to her community. Dopdi is finally caught by an army team led by chief officer Senanayak and suffers a brutal interrogating session where she is repeatedly raped as a military tactic to get information out of the captive. However, Dopdi does not perform the script of fear meant for her body in such forms of oppression. In her form of bodily resistance, Dopdi embraces her naked bruised body and refuses to cover herself out of shame. Her naked protest questions the hypocrisy of the upper-caste privileged masculinity which can devour her in an animalistic manner and yet ask her to dress modestly while negotiating with the authoritative patriarch.

Dopdi is a colloquial linguistic version of Draupadi but unlike the Hindu mythical character her name is inspired from, doesn't fear getting undressed and does not pray to the Almighty for keeping her saree intact when subjected to such public humiliation. She rather refuses to resettle into the patriarchal narrative of how a woman's sartorial behavior should be in everyday reality. Dopdi's act is one of stark bodily resistance. She uses her body as a weapon which even though violated, acts as an archival agent. By refusing to cover her naked body, Draupadi adamantly installs the image of her nudity and bruises indicative of the sexual violence her body has suffered by agents of state-sanctioned security organizations in public memory. Her naked protest interrogates whether the government is not concerned with the safety of people from her community. It is her way of archiving her corporeal oppression. Dopdi resists the erasure of her bodily trauma by those in power. Dopdi, as Chatterjee (1983) opines, acts as the oppositional force to Senanayak's authority even in her bodily oppression. Devi (2018) in the following lines depicts how Dopdi performs resistance to the script of shame after getting gang-raped as she refuses to transform into a presentable self for meeting with the chief officer Senanayak.

> Draupadi's black body comes even closer. Draupadi shakes with an indomitable laughter that Senanayak simply cannot understand. Her ravaged lips bleed as she begins laughing. Draupadi wipes the blood on her palm and says in a voice that is as terrifying, sky splitting and sharp as her ululation, What's the use of clothes? You can strip me, but how can you clothe me again? Are you a man? (Devi 2018, 33)

Interestingly, here Devi addresses Dopdi as Draupadi, blurring her tribal identity by letting go of the colloquial version of her name. This modification in the nomenclature of her character assigns her with a non-tribal version of her name and symbolizes how she is secluded from her tribal community while being apprehended by non-tribal male soldiers. The assignment of the upper-caste name amidst the upper-caste non-tribal men renders Draupadi a stage for transitioning into their world where the mythical character of Draupadi was publicly humiliated in a council of ministers who decided to undress her. Thus, as Dopdi, the tribal Naxalite, she possessed agency and rebelled against the hegemonic system by killing the landowner in her village but as Draupadi, the captive, she is a victim of custodial rape. However, Devi retains her empowering energy to not submit to the dominance of these men of power by refusing to dress and cover her wounds. Draupadi in her act threatens the Brahminical code of conduct for women that prohibits public nudity. Her act threatens the hetero-patriarchal narrative of modesty and chastity that women must accommodate themselves into.

Devi describes the black skin of her subaltern protagonist indicating that her bodily beauty falls outside the desirable realm for the upper-caste society in India which is obsessed with the fairer skin stone (see Chapter 4). Therefore, Draupadi's black and nude body coming closer to Senananyak is a prospect that creates discomfort, not libidinal excitement. Her body is treated as an object on which violence can be performed to make a collective statement to her tribal community on the consequences one faces with such endeavors of rebellion. By not wearing her clothes, she opens this statement for public view and provokes a dialogue of moral judgment in upper-class society. Meenakshi Malhotra (2024) very aptly argues that Draupadi's act makes her an "abject" in Julia Kristeva's term (1982). As abject Kristeva (1989) explains is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Draupadi succeeds in her attempt to create an element of terror by flaunting her bruised naked body as if exposing the record of oppressive treatment, the tribal female body faces at the hands of non-tribal powerholders. She causes a "breakdown in meaning" as "the rapidly advancing body of the torn, naked tribal woman" collapses the "order of things which seems appropriate to Senanayak" (Malhotra, 2024, 181). Draupadi questions the prescribed moral shame that canonical Hindu texts like the *Manusmriti* promote. While women often committed suicide and self-banishment after getting raped, Draupadi continues to stand flaunting her bruises, refusing to erase her punished body from public memory. Dipti Misri (2011) analyses that Draupadi's act

invokes the terror element by being contradictory to her embodiment. Draupadi's wounded naked body is the body of a victim and yet she stands tall to act like one. Misri (2011) describes this scene as a "theatrical unyoking of appearance from demeanor: Draupadi looks like a victim but acts like an agent" (608). Therefore, in her act of refusing to dress up, Draupadi declines the subalternity of her embodied reality. She performs resistance despite enduring corporeal oppression from external forces, by not letting her body be disciplined according to the codes of conduct prevalent in the oppressor's culture. This is why Draupadi becomes a terrifying enemy to Senanayak even though she is unarmed. Draupadi's naked protest makes the very docile body of the tribal woman an agent of terror. However, this is not always the case when the subaltern tribal woman's body is sexually abused. In many forms of bodily exploitation of the subaltern female, the subject is more submissive and her corporeal oppression tends to get erased from the historiography of the dominant public.

Pratibha Ray's novel *The Primal Land* (2001), translated from Odia by Bikram K. Das, deals with the life of Bonda highlanders and gives a detailed account of their society that is driven mainly by their localized myths and folk legends. While the subaltern body of the Bonda woman is trapped in the cultural customs and rituals of Bonda society (more on this in the next section), the onset of state-sanctioned development in the plot places the Bonda woman's body in a more vulnerable space under the outsider's gaze. This is particularly exemplified in the character sketch of Adibari Toki who becomes the first Bonda woman to wear a saree in the narrative. Ray portrays that when the government's development plans took shape in the Bonda society, one of the first tasks the civil workers adopted was to dress the naked Bonda woman. The Bonda woman wears a foot-wide cloth called *ringa* from the waist down, below the navel, and above the thighs. At the back, the *ringa* hangs across the buttocks. It is the only piece of cloth she wears. The rest of her body is naked. The Bonda woman is naked from the waist up. She covers her bare chest with long colorful bead necklaces and her neck with heavy brass rings. In her novel, Ray presents the mythology behind the Bonda woman's attire. According to the popular legend, a group of Bonda women mocked and laughed while *Sita Takrani* (Goddess Sita) was taking a bath in the river which angered the Goddess. She questioned their point of mockery of her nudity while they possessed the same body and cursed them that if they wore any fabric, their land would bear no crops and that the Bonda people would be destroyed (Ray, 2001). After much begging the Goddess felt pity and gave them a single

thread from her saree to cover their genitals. This is the foundation for the Bonda women's dressing sense. Embracing their nudity without any notion of moral shame is ingrained in the local Bonda myths and culture. However, when the government officials from mainland Odisha take up the development project in their society, Ray's narrative portrays how they tried to impose the traditional Hindu attire of Saree on the Bonda female body. Adibari takes up the outsider's costume and accommodates the Brahminical prescription of women's sartorial conduct so that she can be appointed in the development office set in the village and put an end to her poverty despite much opposition from the men of her tribe. However, Adibari while caught juggling between her tribal traditions and new-found modernity, gets duped by a young policeman who promises to marry her. Adibari elopes with this man for love but gets abandoned by him upon reaching the town of Jeypore. Adibari is then taken in by a truck driver who rapes her with his friends in a drunk state at night. Her body is repeatedly violated with sexual abuse by this group of upper-caste non-tribal men who use Adibari as a sexual object. Adibari is ultimately taken in by a local *dhaba* (open-air restaurant) owner in the town who stays away from his wife and children. Ray presents the culmination of her character through the utilitarian regimes thrust upon her embodiment. Describing her life with this restaurant owner, Ray writes,

> Now Adibari shared his bed as well as washed his soiled utensils; in return she was fed and paid a few rupees each month. She had handed her own living corpse over to the old, wheezing, pock-marked man in exchange for a roof overhead. (Ray 2001, 198)

As opposed to the matrilineal Bonda society where the local customs encourage female sexuality and never subject women to sexual slavery, Adibari meets with this unfortunate fate in the non-tribal upper-class semi-urban society. Unlike Draupadi, Adibari is unable to perform any form of resistance after getting repeatedly raped and falls victim to her twice-marginalized social identity. Her attempt to secure paid labor, her adoption of non-Bonda attire like a saree, and her elopement with the upper-class policemen are deplored vehemently by the Bonda elders and therefore she is also banished from her own community. Thus, she could not seek any help from her community as well. When she takes any agency of her subaltern body by changing the prescribed Bonda attire, she faces banishment and her lover's betrayal puts her in a sexually exploitative regime. For Adibari both sets of oppression are functional, one from the community-bound conservativeness

and the other externally inflicted hegemonic sexual oppression from the non-subaltern patriarchy. The first Bonda woman to wear a saree gets erased from the Bonda memory as opposed to how prominently her existence was recorded in the government archives. Her historiography is lost amidst the tensions between her cultural transitions and sexual abuse. Similarly, Gayatri Sharaf's (2016), short story, 'A Mother from Kalahandi' translated from Odia by Sumanyu Satpathy presents a tale where the subaltern female body is taken in as a sexual slave by a privileged upper-caste outsider. Sharaf's (2016) narrative revolves around the life of a married couple Amrita and Swapnesh who seem to lead a happy married life initially. Despite being childless, the mutual love and respect between them seem to have never worn off. However, as one moves ahead in the story, it is revealed that marital bliss is merely a cover for something much more sinister underlying it. Amrita finds out on a given day that Swapnesh has been lying to her about his work trips as she sees him going into another house with another woman. A crestfallen Amrita decides to investigate the matter herself the next day and goes to the same house to find out the truth of the situation.

As she knocks on the door, she meets a young girl, most probably a minor although different from the woman she saw her husband with. Amrita's conversation with the girl reveals that her name is Kumari. Kumari is tribal and belongs to the village called Mahul Gharana from Kalahandi in the region of western Odisha. Kumari makes certain startling revelations while being interrogated by Amrita. She says that her village was famine-stricken and when people were dying of hunger, some of the gentlemen from the city came to her village to represent the issues her community was facing to the government. Ironically, one of these men took their photographs inside their home. Kumari narrates that amidst the burning cries of her mother, questioning the government's inefficiencies, she asked the man if he would like to buy any of her daughters. Sharaf has masterfully created the suspense regarding the identity of this man who under the pretext of doing social work ends up buying the subaltern female body for his selfish pleasures. It is only later that the writer reveals through Kumari, by the photograph she produces before Amrita, that it is none other than her husband Swapnesh who has bought her. Kumari revisits how her body attracted her buyer's attention and how she was sold for a mere three hundred rupees. She laments falling victim to the idea that she will at least get two square meals a day, not realizing at what cost. Sharaf depicts how Kumari gets to know that she will be serving as

a sexual commodity in the conversation she has with her new master Swapnesh on their way back to the city.

> When I was sitting in the car, I asked whether I would get rice every day or not. Pressing my arms, the man said, 'If you listen to me, I'll give you rice and also mutton. Besides, I'll give you many other things.' "'What do I have to do?' I asked. "Pulling me toward him, the man said, 'I'll take care of your hunger, and you take care of mine.' "I said, 'Are you joking, sir? You people come from the city. How can you still be hungry?' "'You are grown up—how can you not understand that, like the hunger for food, there is another hunger, the hunger for flesh?' (Sharaf 2016, 142)

These lines show how the subalternity of Kumari's body is taken advantage of by an upper-class man like Swapnesh. Her socio-economic challenges force her to get engaged in this bodily transaction and her body is used for sexual labor. Swapnesh even mentions in the same conversation that he has a wife but her body is not enough to satiate his hunger. This also implies how he cannot perform his deepest fantasies with Amrita's body because of its Brahminical boundaries. As a chaste upper-caste wife, Amrita's body is supposed to be protected within the realms of domesticity and cannot be exploited perennially for Swapnesh's wildest desires. This would surpass the limits of "allowable erotics" as Brinda Bose (2017) would call it. Therefore, the subaltern female body becomes an easy target to be used and abused for the sexual pleasure of upper-caste/class men like Swapnesh. In this dialogue, it is evident how Swapnesh trades in female flesh because it comes as a cheap commodity owing to its socio-economic circumstances. He exploits the helplessness of Kumari's parents and uses their situation for his benefit. Sharaf's shrewd usage of metaphors of hunger and flesh aids in the understanding of how the dominant upper-class patriarchy feeds off the subaltern female body, making this whole transaction tangible evidence of how caste-based and class-based oppression continues to exist. Amrita also finds out that Kumari has an infant daughter out of this sexual transaction with her master and decides to adopt the baby girl and free Kumari of this slavery. However, the story does not reveal if she gets to confront her husband regarding the crime he has committed or what actions she takes against him. She promises Kumari that she will give her baby the rights she deserves which indicates that she plans to give her the resources that Swapnesh would have spent for their own child had they were not childless. In that case, it is probable

that she is still depending on her husband's finances and that Swapnesh does not receive any legal action. Amrita is seen as more worried about the betrayal she receives from her husband than the heinous crime that Kumari is a victim of. She frees Kumari with the help of her privileged social stature and separates her from her baby. Although this separation is defined by a noble cause, one has to remember that Amrita desired a child for her household too. Thus, this benevolent act can also be interpreted as not being completely altruistic. The fact that she frees Kumari instead of taking her to a police station and filing a report against her husband, shows how the subaltern is always deceived and given only partial justice mostly in the form of limited compensation. Even while freeing Kumari, Amrita oppresses her by separating her from her daughter. She justifies this act by claiming to fulfill her daughter's humanitarian rights but conveniently neglects the trauma this would inflict on Kumari. Amrita's solution for Kumari is sending her back to her native village which only reconfigures her embodiment to its subaltern roots and does not work for her social upliftment. In a way, Amrita ensures that Kumari's subalternity stays intact without making a spectacle of the oppression her body endured at the hands of her husband.

Interestingly, female bodies are always characterized by the notion of pollution and purity. Meenakshi Malhotra (2024) opines that because of biological bodily "secretions" like "menstruation and lactation", the female body is culturally implicated as impure regardless of its caste, class, or other vectors of social identity (177). However, while upper-caste women according to Hindu scriptures can purify themselves of their impurity, lower-caste women do not have access to such purifying methods. The subaltern female body is thus imposed with the notion of perennial impurity. While in the Brahminical upper-caste society endogamy is strictly observed to avoid any corporeal contamination, the bodies of women from subaltern communities become sites for observing hierarchical power and dominance. Due to their socio-economic challenges many Dalit and tribal women do physical labor and earn daily wages. Since they are not limited to the realms of domesticity, they are conceived to be already under the public gaze which enables men of socially superior communities to take sexual leeway with their bodies. Discussing this aspect of subaltern female embodiment, Shailaja Paik (2014) writes, "According to the upper-castes, Dalit women were already in the public gaze and did not need to concern themselves with issues of dignity and honor" (87). There is a notion of superiority conferred on the upper-caste Hindu wife through the chastity and modesty practiced by her which urges men to

treat her embodiment with dignity. However, the very act of crossing domestic boundaries and working in public spaces makes the subaltern female body accessible to men other than the husband and thus treated with a certain licentiousness. To take amorous leeway with the subaltern female body is thus not considered to be sinful for the upper-caste Hindu male since there is no legal or moral code in the Hindu culture protecting the wife from the husband's adultery (see Chapter 4). Despite concepts of impurity and untouchability, the subaltern female body is often sexually violated by the upper-caste male. Even though the subaltern female body is accessible to the public gaze, the Hindu scriptures denounce any contact with the subaltern communities for higher castes, and yet the men from authoritative spaces consume these bodies be it out of dissent or libidinal ecstasy. Charu Gupta (2011) addresses this duality as she claims that "the Dalit female body was both at the same time – repulsive and desirable, untouchable and available, reproductive and productive" (25).

Gupta's (2011) point essentially unveils the fact that the subaltern female body can only be consumed in secrecy. It cannot be desired by the socially superior dominant communities in public. It can only be violated undercover. Therefore, in all the above literary case studies, the tribal female body was raped and sexually exploited by upper-caste men only in secrecy. Adibari is gang-raped far from her community home, in a civilized town in the dead of the night and she is ultimately provided shelter by a restaurant owner in exchange for sexual obedience. It is noteworthy that this restaurant owner also stays far away from his wife and children. Thus, Adibari's body could be violated for the sexual pleasure of these men only in the silence of the night and when the upper-caste wife is not available. Adibari's association with the owner is not even legitimate as she is treated like a worker. Similarly, Kumari is kept in a secret location outside the knowledge of any relatives of Swapnesh let alone his wife. Therefore, in Devi's narrative when Draupadi refuses to perform this act of keeping her violation by the upper-caste men a secret, she performs an urgent bodily resistance. By asking her to wear her clothes, the military officials try to maintain the impossibility of them engaging with an impure body like hers. The Constitution of India has passed laws like the Prevention of Atrocities Act in 1989 including caste insults, sexual violence, etc. (Malhotra 2024, 180). However, many real-life events prove that these laws are not observed strictly to create fear among upper-caste criminals committing these crimes. For instance, there is the Hathras case where a nineteen-year-old Dalit girl, raped and murdered, was cremated "amid heavy police

deployment" without the consent or knowledge of her family[14]. Also, the case in Manipur is strikingly similar to Draupadi, where a group of women from the Meitei tribe performed a naked protest in front of the headquarters of the Assam Rifles opposing the custodial rape and mutilation of thirty-two-year-old insurgent Thangjam Manorama.[15] Such state-sanctioned crimes make one question the validity of these legal remedies. Similarly, the Criminal Tribe Act (1871) passed during the British colonial times facilitated the incarceration and disciplining of around 150 tribes recognized for their criminal tendencies was withdrawn by the Indian government and replaced by the Habitual Offender's Act in 1952 which Malhotra claims is not significantly different in terms of being accommodative than the former (ibid). Therefore, the hypocrisy of the powerholders and policymakers can be seen in the treatment of the subaltern, specifically the subaltern female body. Moreover, except for the character of Draupadi, in the other two literary representations, the subaltern woman is seen trapped in a dynamic of servility with their oppressor as Kumari addresses Swapnesh as 'sir' and Adibari is exploited by her employer.

These hierarchical power dynamics are translated to the body of the subaltern woman. So, is it just that the subaltern female body is publicly accessible and sexually vulnerable that the marginalized women get corporeally oppressed, or is there a deeper meaning to this performance of power? The absolute control over the subaltern female body does not only render sexual satisfaction to the oppressor but also a stage to enact power and territorialization. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) comments on this tendency of the dominant groups where the female body is treated like a cartographic landscape where land acquisition through power struggles gets mapped. Spivak (1988) writes, "The group rape perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition" (303). Thus, the ownership acted upon the subaltern female body and the sexual entitlement to it performed by the group of oppressors can also be read as a dominant group's territorialization over it. It shows how the marginalized tribal female body suffers through its submissive servility forced upon by their socio-economic limitations. The state apparatus involved in protecting the upper-caste criminals against such territorialization

[14] See Hathras was no exception, at least 4 'rape' victims were 'forcibly cremated' by police https://theprint.in/india/hathras-was-no-exception-at-least-4-rape-victims-were-forcibly-cremated-by-police/743817/

[15] See 17 years since their naked protest against Army, 'Mothers of Manipur' say fight not over yet https://theprint.in/india/17-years-since-their-naked-protest-against-army-mothers-of-manipur-say-fight-not-over-yet/700093/

and the systematic silencing of the subaltern subjectivity expose how these oppressions are institutionalized. Draupadi's resistance to cover her raped body is a form of corporeal opposition that is yet to be experienced outside of literary scape. The body of the marginalized tribal woman also is a threatening site that is constantly controlled to disrupt any of its acquired agency. However, is this disruption of bodily agency facilitated only by the outsider privileged upper-caste dominant male or does it also occur within their own socio-cultural setting by other men of their own community?

3.2. Caged in Culture: Corporeal Disciplining within the Community

To allege that it is only the outsider upper-caste male who is responsible for the corporeal oppression of the subaltern female body will still be a parochial interpretation. The subaltern woman is also marginalized for being a woman. In her study on caste, Uma Chakravarti (2018) makes an important statement as she writes that,

> Cultural oppression as it operates in the lives of Dalits and women, especially on women of the lower castes, is far more dehumanizing than economic exploitation, which we understand as the dominant feature of class, by itself (Chakravarti 2018, 7)

Chakravarti brings forth a vital interrogation of the cultural customs of the subaltern woman that carry brutal implications on their bodies and might have a dehumanizing impact. Just as how Brahminical patriarchy imposes many restrictions on the female body, the subaltern communities also have their fair share of ritualistic challenges. This can be especially demonstrated in the case of the tribal Bonda culture portrayed in Pratibha Ray's *The Primal Land* (2001). Through Ray's portrayal of the Bonda tribe, one gets an introduction to their rigid value systems and straightforward manner of incorporating justice; a world still unadulterated from the civilized colonial modernism, deceit, and tricks. Ray's narrative offers a platform to focus on the corporeality of the Bonda women and how their bodies are used as priced commodities in the Bonda labor market and economy while also being treated as objects of desire and lust. The novel is suffused with socio-cultural anecdotes that inform the reader of the unjust rules for the Bonda woman as her life is meant to work tirelessly towards feeding her family. Although it is well backed with ethnographic research, Ray's (2001) novel is often criticized for its hegemonic non-tribal Hindu upper-caste authorship, written from an outsider's perspective. However, the

significance of her text cannot be denied for its unique subject and the wide unavailability of alternate Bonda narratives in Odia literature. Moreover, the novel efficiently provides instances of how the Bonda culture is perceived from the non-tribal lens especially when the government attempts to enter the Bonda society with an ambitious project of their overall development. Interestingly, the first and foremost change towards the Bonda development that the officials remained adamant about, is dressing the naked Bonda women. The imposition of popular morals in a bid to homogenize culture also suggests that the female body is the symbol for exhibiting imprints of civilization as well as keeping the traditions uplifted. Thus, to read the nuances of the body of the subaltern woman, it is also important to analyze how she is caught in the conflict between tribal identity and modernity (Bhandari et al., 2019) and torn between these two responsibilities; to read her as a victim of both her traditional customs and the master's modernizing traits. Contrary to the stereotypically accepted age gap between the husband and the wife in the plains of Odisha, the Bonda custom requires the wife to be at least ten or fifteen years older than her husband (Chitra et al., 2021).

In her novel, Ray presents the legend of Bundi Mahadei who escaped from her seized kingdom with her infant son to save his life, and reveals how this legend has been used as the mythical background for the custom of the wife being older (Ray, 2001). Every wife is Bundi Mahadei and her child-husband is the son she carried. Although by relating this folk legend with the unique marriage customs in Bonda society, the Bonda tradition projects the Bonda women as strong and independent who can be trusted with the responsibility of the Bonda's well-being, it also at the same time poses a serious threat to her corporeal needs. Being compared with the stark stature of Bundi Mahadei, glorifying independence and abled existence are the only rewards that the Bonda women get out of their marriages. Since they marry boys who are barely eight to ten years old and are still accustomed to sleeping with their mothers, the young fertile Bonda woman is left to lead a solitary life until her husband becomes a man. She is forbidden to sleep in the *selani dingo* while her boy-husband can visit them often to learn the art of love-making. The *selani dingos* are dormitories spread across all twelve Bonda villages where young Bonda women sleep and get courted by the Bonda boys for marriage. These *selani dingos* are sites of free sexual agency where the Bonda woman exercises her free choice in selecting a sexual partner. However, her sexual encounter does not assure the Bonda man of her commitment. Ray has presented Bonda women probably at their strongest embodied selves in these *selani*

dingos where even if they wear a Bonda's bracelet, they still have the choice of sleeping with another, accepting another man's bracelet later and this can go on until the marriage is sealed with a bride's price. Interestingly, the women in *selani dingos* mostly engage sexually with elder Bonda men who are most probably married or widowers while the younger ones remain to be dumb spectators albeit ironically it is the younger Bonda boys they will have to marry. The Bonda woman once married cannot visit these *selani dingos* and thus her sexual longings are left unattended to by her husband as she waits for him to become a man. The boy-husband runs away from his wife and shies away from her since "what answers could the frightened child find to the questions in the woman's body?" (Ray 2001, 42). Ray has presented the Bonda marriage system initially as a safeguard against death since the wife who works all her life will have her much younger husband to take care of her in old age, disregarding the need for bodily pleasures that the men can readily fulfill by visiting the *selani dingos,* unlike a married Bonda woman. However, when the Bonda reaches the peak of his sexual prowess, his wife is already in decline and is unable to satisfy his needs. Depicting this aspect, Ray questions the benefit of such a marriage where there is a gap in the bodily desires as she interrogates,

> And is she a wife if she cannot give her man connubial bliss? When the Bonda child grows into *dhangra* (young man) his wife is already in decline. What physical pleasure can she give? Then what is such a marriage worth? (Ray 2001, 51)

In these lines, Ray rather questions the worth of the Bonda female body since it is unable to provide conjugal bliss to the husband when he comes of age but neglects the question of how the Bonda woman herself is caged within a marriage where she does not have access to address her own bodily desires. The plot shows that because of these discrepancies between the bodily desires of the husband and wife in a Bonda marriage, it is common for the father-in-law and the elder brother-in-law to have secret amorous relationships with the newly wedded Bonda woman. Ray also draws instances contradicting her initial claim of the marriage system being a safety net for the Bonda woman's old age, where the Bonda husband abandons her old wife because she is no longer desirable. The character of Budei Toki meets with such a tragic fate. Budei unflinchingly waits for her husband Bagha Bindhu's prison sentence of fourteen years to end, meanwhile taking care of his land, cattle, etc. but when Bagha Bindhu returns home, he finds his wife unattractively old and suggests that the mirror he got her as a gift should rather be given

to his newly wedded daughter-in-law Sanki. Witnessing her young husband's admiration for her young daughter-in-law, Budei grows extremely insecure about her own body and appearance. Ray vividly paints this agony in a scene where both women are taking a bath:

> As Sanki, Budei Toki's daughter-in-law, scrubbed her back, she could feel the slackness in Budei Toki's body. But when Budei scrubbed Sanki's back it felt as hard as wood. How strong, how smooth her body was! Budei glanced sideways at Sanki's breasts. Then she picked up her bead necklaces and covered up her own chest. (Ray 2001, 123)

The subaltern culture where the Bonda female body is entrapped makes her feel inadequate in her aging skin leading to appearance anxiety. The Bonda women like Budei might not have felt so had their husbands been of their age and would not have had to eye the younger female members of the family. Bagha Bindhu later even goes on to get a second much younger wife and divorces Budei Toki, abandoning her in her old age. This is also true for the reverse scenarios as well since the young daughter-in-law is also craving attention as her own husband is just a child and cannot care much for her needs. Sanki therefore feels the sexual tension between her and her father-in-law Bagha Bindhu. She feels nervous yet thrilled with the idea when he suggests that it is him who knocks at her door at night. The Bonda women's lives are all about juggling between craving attention and working hard to provide for the family while none of their desires are legitimately addressed in their marriages.

The Bonda woman nurses her husband into manhood in the hopes of being looked after in her old age "but when she grows too feeble to work in the fields the Bonda's mind begins to stray" (Ray 2001, 162). The Bonda life is deeply governed by their myths and folktales. Such myths also decide upon the Bonda women's costume. As discussed earlier, it is due to the curse of Goddess Sita that the Bonda female body is naked. It is believed in their local custom that if they wear more clothing, their lands will be cursed with droughts. Ray also has rendered the reader with a more pragmatic reason behind this clothing as she notes that the Bonda woman's body is meant to work in the fields; therefore, while her hips, buttocks, and calves are free to move, she works more efficiently. She does not need to waste her time changing her clothes. The Bonda women's head is also shaved for the same reason. To beautify her shaved head the Bonda woman wears vibrant headbands with beads. Sarat Kumar Jena (2019) excoriates Ray's misrepresentation of the Bonda myth

with the hegemonic non-tribal Hindu Goddess to explain female nudity in her novel. Jena asserts that Ray's novel does not give the community the space for carrying out alternate autonomous indigenous knowledge systems and weaves its narrative with a subtle criticism of the Bonda's primitive superstitions. The tone of the narrative is indeed written to amuse the readers who are alien to the Bonda ways of life but at the same time, the novel somehow points out that women in a naked society cannot and should not be judged by those who are dressed. A specific instance can be drawn from the novel when the progress of the Government project of Bonda development under the leadership of the character of Sitanath Sahu relies on the clothing of the Bonda women. The women politicians from the plains far away from the Bonda life demand that the Bonda woman must be dressed and covered, imposing non-tribal Brahminical moral codes on the subaltern embodiment of Bonda women. Through the homogenizing policies of 'decent' dress codes, the future of the Bonda culture wobbles in unstable hybridity. Ironically, these politicians and other authorities did not emphasize much on changing the Bonda men's *ghusi* (loincloth) into shirts and dhoti but were adamant about the Bonda women wearing sarees.

The forced imposition of morals from an alien land demonstrates that the educated outsider is symptomatic of colonial traits and even though belongs to the same motherland, is no less than a colonizer. By emphasizing the Bonda women wearing saree, the power dynamics between the government and the marginalized put the subaltern woman through non-tribal patriarchal hegemonic structures and at the same time get them rejected by the rigid culture at home which believes that their nudity ensures communal prosperity, feeds the Bonda society. Ray also reveals her narrative that while the government officials were keen on recording how many Bonda women had started wearing sarees and the length of their dresses, their records find no mention of the number of malnourished children and the deaths that followed. Moreover, when the matter of a Bonda woman wearing a saree gets discussed in the court of *panchsati* (representatives of village Panchayat), the young Bonda men resisted this new development by threatening to not marry or court the saree-clad Bonda women. The character of Adibari Toki who chooses to wear the outsider's costume decides that she will change into her *ringa* once her job at the government project office is done. But one also finds her sleeping in the office room only, claiming that she and her friends who decided to wear saree are bullied by others in the *selani dingos* and the wildly violent Bonda men might hurt them. The Bonda women in the speeding times of industrialization and cultural homogenization, juggle in the liminal space between

tradition and modernism. Her body becomes a site where both the tribal and non-tribal patriarchy carve their imprints and make their presence felt. In the Bonda society, contrary to the popular gender roles the women are the sole breadwinners for the family, toiling hard in the fields while men are lazily intoxicated with *Sapung* (local liquor acquired from the *Salap* trees) and lie around picking fights. The Bonda women are desirable for their strong arms which indicates their capability of working hard. At the same time, the ideal woman also has the necessary body ideals to be perceived as a potential reproductive body. Ray describes these specific body ideals in the following lines:

> At the waist, the ideal *selani* (girl in Bonda dialect) had to be slender, but the wider she was round the hips the better. Large, fleshly buttocks were auspicious: they presaged many healthy offspring, who would be well-tended. (Ray 2001, 27)

The Bonda woman's tireless labor is met with no rewards, not in the form of marital pleasures or old-age care. Her body is treated mainly with a sense of admiration for its capacity to perform labor, both reproductive and otherwise. She is considered an asset and therefore the father receives a hefty bride's price when she gets married. In that aspect, the Bonda society can be understood as matriarchal to some extent but women don't have much agency beyond this. The bride's price is given to the father as he claims the ownership of the unmarried Bonda woman and then in case of a second marriage upon the husband's death, the bride's price is given to the father-in-law. Never did the Bonda woman herself get any monetary reward for her labor. Her labor gets cloaked in the socio-cultural order of the Bonda society. The Bonda women as field workers never get their dues in the familial system for their productive and reproductive bodies.

Procreation is never a taboo for the Bonda. Since *selani dingos* so openly support pre-marital sex, when the Bonda woman conceives out of wedlock, she approaches the father of her unborn child to marry her. But if the father of the child refuses to marry, he has to pay huge compensation to the father of the Bonda girl in the form of cattle, goat, rice, liquor, and almost double the bride's price. In the novel, the character of Sombari meets with a similar fate, and the Bonda man who impregnated her pays the compensation. However, it is the father who benefits from this transaction. Commenting on that aspect Ray writes, "Sombari's father was lucky; Hadi would pay him compensation, and any *dhangra* (Bonda boy) who married Sombari would also pay him the bride's price" (Ray, 2001, 46). The father here benefits from the daughter's womb as she reproduces a child

conceived out of wedlock. Although it is her labor for nine months, the compensation is traded off to the father since the female body is so often owned by a patriarchal authority irrespective of the community it belongs to. The fertility of the female body is considered to be her most lucrative feature. The Bonda woman is respected for her ability to procreate but is never rewarded with compensation or the bride's price. Even in old age when the character of Budei Toki gets divorced from her husband, she had no say in the divorce and the compensation to be paid in case of a divorce is paid to the girl's family. In the novel, Budei is left stranded by both her husband and her father's family since she is no longer capable of doing much labor. Her aging body has lost its capacity to be exploited any further for its labor. No part of the divorce compensation is paid to her. Budei leads a solitary life, being rejected for her aging body which is incapable of harsh physical labor. Thus, the subaltern female body of the Bonda tribal woman is exploited for doing physical and reproductive labor. The subalternity of the Bonda woman is in the fact that her bodily needs are ever taken care of and paid heed to. The Bonda female sexuality is neglected before the nurturing of her young husband. The Bonda woman is stuck with the eternal role of motherhood and in her life, she even nurses her husband into manhood for a fleeting temporary period of sexual pleasure before her youth starts declining and her body is no longer desirable to her young manly husband.

The age gap renders the Bonda woman with a certain appearance anxiety as she compares herself with all the young women her husband gets attracted to. Ray has also with rare authenticity depicted the labor politics of the Bonda society where the gendered idea of labor is dismantled since it is the women who are expected to work hard in the field and feed the family. But they also have to do the household chores as well which means the husband practically performs no duties apart from just straying in the forest and getting engaged in feuds. The Bonda woman although performs all the labor never gets rewarded in any kind. Her life is mostly about waiting for her child-husband to turn into a man, waiting for him to return from a jail sentence, or leading a solitary life as an old woman or a widow. The Bonda woman is objectified for her productivity and is exploited physically to serve her husband. This gendered dynamic defines her body's subalternity. The marginalized body of the Bonda woman becomes palpable through the way she is embodied in her culture. Her corporeality becomes more tangible through the labor she is incessantly required to do her entire life. The Bonda culture prepares the subaltern female body for what is called by Anupama Rao (2018), her "enfleshment" in the social setting

(12). There is a particular corporeal disciplining designed to serve men and even though the modes of this patriarchal servility are completely different from those of the Brahminical codes of chastity and domesticity, the "enfleshment" of the subaltern body within a heteropatriarchal hegemony is accomplished just as rigidly. The argument that the subaltern female body is already under the public gaze may seem valid in the case of the Bonda women because of their communal nudity but does not make their bodies available to be sexually acquired and territorialized by the outsider. Despite enjoying the luxury of sexual freedom in their youth, the Bonda women once married are strictly abused for their capabilities of doing physical labor along with a rigorous omission of their bodily desires and that's how they get caged within their socio-cultural location. The fact that the Bonda women's bodies are treated like sites for upholding the tribal culture is why Adibari faces a collective backlash from Bonda men because she wears a saree so much so that she cannot continue to sleep in *selani dingos* fearing that she might be hurt by the violent Bonda men. This shows how women's bodies are repositories for culture and traditions as discussed earlier (see Chapter 2).

This mode of bodily imposition of a dressing choice and administering a form of corporeal punishment when the female body fails to abide by the sartorial rules of the community is also found in the short story, 'The Girl with Long Hair' by Arupa Patangia Kalita (2020), translated from Assamese by Ranjita Biswas. Kalita's short story introduces the protagonist Mainao who is young, cheerful, and attractive. Kalita (2020) paints the most striking feature of her body, her "long, lovely hair reaching to her hips, black, silky and well-oiled" (8). Mainao belongs to the Bodo tribe of Assam and the story is set against the backdrop of Bodo agitation. As discussed earlier in case Kalita's novel *The Story of Felanee* (2013), the Bodo agitators forced Bodo women to wear the traditional Bodo attire called *dokhona* (see Chapter 2). Mainao is warned by the consequence she witnesses other Bodo women facing upon failing to wear the traditional attire. Mainao's innocent wish to visit the festival of Durga Puja in her new salwar suit is forbidden due to the strong response of agitators toward women who are wearing the attires of other cultures or celebrating their festivals. Her young age and child-like excitement, however, make her fall for the temptation of going in secret with the aid of her friends. Kalita (2020) writes how Mainao's presence in the festival in non-Bodo attire gets noted despite her best efforts and consequently, she is branded a criminal for her corporeal disobedience. Mainao's innocent adventure then transforms into a grave sin and the leaders of the Bodo movement

urge for a corporeal punishment to teach the girl a lesson. For Mainao who cherished her long hair which has been a stark marker of her corporeal identity, this is a crushing moment and protests helplessly to no avail. Kalita paints this scene in the following lines:

> Somebody brought a pair of scissors and Mainao's weeping increased. No, she would not allow it…she would not cut her precious hair. The arrogant boy who had brought the scissors was ordered to start snipping all the same. The stocky boy, perhaps about five years older to her, dragged Mainao to the centre of the courtyard. Her soft wrist showed marks of his rough fingers. (Kalita 2020, 13)

As evident from these lines, Mainao gets manhandled for the corporeal punishment thrust upon her and sees her bodily autonomy getting jeopardized. This rough manhandling of Mainao's tribal body goes even further as at one point her Dokhona slips off. While she continues resisting only in her blouse and petticoat, the lower hooks of her blouse get unhooked. Kalita describes how it adds another complicated layer to her public humiliation as "her breasts, in the new bloom of youth, showed from beneath the torn blouse" (Kalita, 2020, 14). It shows how ironically the men who wanted to dress the subaltern female body with a traditional cultural attire to make a political statement were not bothered with dignifying it with honor if it failed in their agenda. It shows the hypocrisy of subaltern patriarchy. While the men otherwise fight with external dominant non-subaltern communities for equal cultural representation and humanitarian rights, the female body is used by them as a tool to exhibit their political demands. The autonomy of the subaltern female body is lost in such marginalized spaces when it comes to fighting for communal rights.

Kalita (2020) also brings in other examples of such corporeal oppression within the community that are justified by the larger cause of the politically charged Bodo agitation which relies on the subaltern female body to promote its cultural stance. For instance, Mainao's aunt wears a salwar suit to her college like girls of other communities and gets harassed because of this harmless act. The agents of the Bodo agitation cut her clothes into shreds making her walk back home in broad daylight in those torn clothes. Such bodily mortification meted out to women of the Bodo tribe for their autonomous sartorial choices, disciplines their bodies according to the patriarchal codes of conduct. The subaltern female body is forced to represent the communal costume for a patriarchal political movement that only uses women's bodies as objects of cultural exhibition. The fundamental idea of

respecting the female body and not violating it gets absolutely neglected before the daring act of not following the prescribed attire to cover the body. Mainao performs resistance to this bodily imposition but the resistance backfires at her more tragically. The manhandling of Mainao's body mentioned above leads to her corporeal violation as her clothes get torn in the process. Since her shame is not protected in the public and there is a spectacle of her resistance where the public witnesses a strange man touching her body, it is treated like an unplanned violation that needs a cultural remedy to save the honor of Mainao's body. The duality of this notion is apparent in the fact that the violation of her body gets treated like an accident that was not the motive of the perpetrator. It is the female body that is punished yet again because it dared to resist the verdict of the agitation movement leaders. Another trial is held to resolve the issue of this so-called accidental bodily violation of the subaltern female within her own community where a verdict is given that Mainao must marry the man who had cut her hair. Interestingly, Kalita has introduced the reader to the oral narrative of Bodo culture on which this decision to marry the violator is based. She mentions the tale of two sisters Asaigi and Baisagi who were once caught stealing fruits from a garden by a man called Chandrabao and while freeing them Chandrabao had to touch their bodies.

This sin of touching the bodies accidentally while freeing them provokes a metaphysical ecological response as Kalita (2020) notes, "darkness descended at daytime, crows cawed unnaturally…everything looked abnormal" (15). This change in nature's order sets the tone for a sinister theme, achieving an objective correlative in the tale. The gravity of this sin of touching the subaltern female body makes the man marry the two sisters to undo the sin, "otherwise who would marry young women who had been defiled by the touch of the stranger?" (Kalita, 2020, 15). It is noteworthy that this idea of undoing the sin with a marital remedy is often proposed in the non-subaltern spaces as well where rape victims are asked to marry the rapist. It promotes a misogynist culture of masculine entitlement to the female body. Mainao becomes a victim of this entitlement within her own community due to its cultural imposition. She is asked to marry and offer her body at service to her violator so that her honor is saved. However, no one pays heed to her honor when orders were passed to manhandle her and forcibly cut her hair as part of her corporeal punishment. The subaltern female body is rendered untouchable even within the community though not boldly practised but observed as a significant violation of its chastity. Thus, while the subaltern female body is untouchable in the upper-caste society because it is a pollutant,

in its marginalized society, it is untouchable for its chastity to be kept intact. Mainao gets tormented for wearing an attire she was forbidden to wear. While she performs her subjective understanding of her corporeality by wearing a dress she would like to, her subjectivity is silenced because of the hegemonic gendered relations prevalent in her community. In the ritualistic practice of wearing a traditional Bodo attire, Mainao fails to embody herself and therefore is treated as an outcaste deserving of public humiliation within her tribal community. She is expected to submissively accept the verdict for her embodiment but because she resists, she faces further consequences of being violated by a man she ultimately has to marry. Despite being an untouchable element, the tribal Bodo body is imposed with the mandate of staging a cultural allegiance by wearing the tribal attire and flaunting it as a bearer of a cultural symbol. The marginalized tribal body of Mainao in this context is "drawn as the embedding repository of the intertwined caste ideologies and gender relation" (Pal, 2021, 116). Similarly, Adibari's corporeality also suffers because of such stringent sartorial codes where she is treated like an outcast for letting go of her tribal costume and her cultural nudity since it is believed in Bonda culture that this act will endanger their communal prosperity.

Both Adibari and Mainao are objectified as palpable tools to ensure cultural upliftment while their honor and dignity come secondary for the men of their own communities. This shows how the subaltern female body also has an added layer of subalternity in their own communal spaces that subject them to corporeal oppression and disciplining. More importantly, it erases their subjective ideals for their own body and the autonomy from their embodied reality. Bidisha Pal (2021) discusses how the Dalit female body is doubly marginalized and argues that the subaltern female body "lies in the category of sub-subaltern" (109) since it faces oppression both at the hand of upper-caste and lower-caste men or men of their own subaltern community. The subalternity of the female body is consistently functional in such communal spaces where they are caged with oppressive ritualistic and traditional regimes while only the mode of bodily disciplining varies. The sexuality of the subaltern female body is another area that is often exploited for masculine desires not just in the upper-caste or upper-class society but also in the lower-caste communities even inside endogamous marriages. Adhikari's (2020) short story, 'The Ghat of the Date Palm Tree and Panchi's Sense Organs' translated from Bengali by Barnali Pain and Gargi Talapatra, presents a case like that. Adhikari's short story is the only text among the ones selected for this chapter's analysis that offers a Dalit narrative from a Dalit writer.

The story presents the Dalit protagonist a fourteen-year-old girl Panchi. Adhikari (2020) inculcates a very clever metaphor of hunger in the short story as she introduces Panchi as someone whose sense organs are all focused on a single sense: the sense of taste. Panchi's cravings for a plate full of rice drive her in life. She dreams about sleeping without a hungry and growling belly as her parents struggle to make ends meet. The reader quickly gains an understanding of Panchi's financial situation and her socio-economic challenges. The fact that all of Panchi's sense organs are focused on her hunger for food also implies the lack of any other bodily cravings in her; cravings that puberty often results in. One quickly moves to the scene of her cousin Hasi didi's wedding where Panchi eats to her heart's content and becomes very sad when the wedding is over. In a ritual when the newly wedded couple grace the bride's home for the first time, Panchi overhears the conversation between Hasi and her friend about her conjugal life.

Adhikari (2020) has written most of the sexual conversations in metaphorical innuendoes where the sexual connotations are implicit. Hasi talks about her sexual experience with her husband, giving licentious descriptions of his body using phallic metaphors like a strong bull and an equally "stiff and stunning" plough (Adhikari, 2020, 83). Adhikari retains the rawness of this sexually charged conversation between the two friends in her plot and also shows the sexual culture in Dalit society where women are not forbidden to joke about their sexual experiences unlike in the Brahminical setup. Panchi who overhears this conversation takes the metaphors in their literal sense and comes to an understanding that her brother-in-law has an agricultural farm where he uses the "bull" with the "plough" to cultivate. She gets even more convinced of her naïve assumption when she hears her cousin's friend teasingly say to her brother-in-law, "Beware! Don't think of raising a crop immediately!" (Adhikari, 2020, 84) and Hasi's husband reply to this joke provokes strong desires in Panchi's mind. He replies,

> Cannot promise really. Your friend has such immense hunger- she keeps craving for it all the time. I have just one wife, after all! I must feed her properly! It is the responsibility of the husband. (Adhikari 2020, 84-85)

This statement to Panchi comes across as a one-stop solution for all her culinary cravings. She imagines that if she marries like her cousin, it will be her husband's duty to feed her. Taking the metaphorical as the literal, Panchi plans to get married so that she will be able to eat to her heart's content. She dreams of an in-law's place which will have a cultivable

land and she will grow crops so that never again in life she will have to face hunger. Her parents worried about their financial stature and their daughter Panchi's undesirable body which the narrator describes as "dark" and "ugly", didn't waste any time when Hasi's husband brings a prospective groom. Here, Panchi's bodily beauty is getting judged against Brahminical ideals of light skin and fair body. And because Panchi's body doesn't fit into these Brahminical ideals, her body is offered as a cheap and easily accessible commodity. Nishat Haider (2024) calls this a "problematic Brahminization of female corporeal aesthetics" (29). Adhikari (2020) shows how Panchi all the while is fixated on the prospect of getting rice every day and asks her brother-in-law innocently whether they have a bull and a plough or not. It is amusing how everyone thinks that Panchi is playing with the same sexual wordplay while she means everything literally. On the wedding night, when Panchi wants to retire for the day, her husband Langra Bishe approaches her to consummate the marriage. Adhikari implements the metaphor of a date palm tree in this context, suggesting another phallic imagery. Langra Bishe initially coaxes Panchi into the act of going "upwards and downwards" the date palm tree but eventually gets irritated with her inexperience and forces her. In the following lines, using a language of sexual innuendoes, Adhikar vividly depicts the scene of the marital rape Panchi endures.

> The pain brought tears to Panchi's eyes. 'Let me go today,' Panchi said, 'No more'.
>
> Bishe said, 'What do you mean 'no more'? We are yet to start the game. You will have to move up and down, up and down, up and down these steps.'
>
> 'How many times? Panchi asked, her eyes brimming over with tears.
>
> Langra Bishe said, 'How many times? Many times! Up and down, up and down, up and down… (Adhikari 2020, 88)

In these lines, it is evident that Panchi is being violated without her consent by her husband. She is sexually abused, lured by the idea of fulfilling her hunger for food while ironically her subaltern body becomes an object to fulfill her husband's hunger for flesh. Panchi's bodily oppression resembles Kumari's tragedy. Like Kumari, Panchi is also lured by the fact that her marriage can be the end of her hunger for food but like Kumari, she too is imposed with the duty of taking care of her husband's hunger for flesh. The only difference between the two cases is that Kumari is oppressed by a man who buys her and openly shares with her the relationship of a master and a sexual slave while Panchi receives the same treatment from her husband within the guise of the marriage. Panchi soon loses her

appetite for food when she realizes that at what corporeal cost the luxury of a mere two meals a day comes. However, unlike Kumari, Panchi performs corporeal resistance in the situation she gets trapped in. Panchi comes back from her husband's home on the pretext of visiting her parents and decides not to return to a life of bodily abuse. She takes agency of her corporeality by not relying on her husband for two meals a day and finds work in the upper-caste society as a maid. Panchi wisely asks for only food in the form of her salary and not money. She gets three meals a day from her employer's household and she is very satiated with the prospect. Panchi also appropriates her agential embodiment as she kicks Langra Bishe when he tries to drag her back to his home. Adhikari has made Langra Bishe's character very similar to that of an exploiting landlord as she reveals his chain of thoughts when Panchi abandons him. Langra Bishe is motivated to not give up on the idea of bringing his wife back home because she is "a new bride who was yet to be used properly and brought with her parents who were quite young and who earned!" (Adhikari 2020, 91). The thought of exploiting not just Panchi's subaltern body but also her parents' for physical labor, reveals a very privileged patriarchal entitlement in Langra Bishe's character. Even though Panchi resists Langra Bishe's advances and strongly condemns the idea of going back to her husband, her maturing body experiences new desires that she was unaware of.

Adhikari (2020) explores the question of how the subaltern female body, traumatized by marital rape, develops a healthy relationship with the pleasure-seeking aspect of her body. She demonstrates that Panchi finally knows how to be self-reliant to curb all her hunger with the discovery of self-pleasure and masturbation. Her introduction to masturbation takes place with her husband when he tells her that he has been moving along the landing of the date palm tree on his own for so long that he has always pined for a wife to accompany him in this adventure. When Panchi suggests to him that he should do that on his own even when she is there, he beats her for such a proposal. Panchi discovers through this altercation that men are not satisfied by just masturbation and need a woman to experience the zenith of their sexual cravings. Thus, Panchi performs her desires by trying the same thing she suggests to her husband. When her mother questions her decision to never marry again, she confesses about her lone adventures exploring her sexuality. She laughs and tells her mother, "Wives do not need husbands; it is husbands who need wives!" (Adhikari 2020, 97). Panchi then goes on to tell her how she has equipped herself to take care of her bodily needs in the following conversation.

> To rid her mother of her worries, Panchi told her mother one day, 'Ma, please do not be angry with me. I now traverse the landing of the date palm tree all by myself.'
>
> Panchi 's mother replied, shocked- 'What?'
> Panchi said, 'Yes Ma, in the darkness of the night, I go to the landing and move upwards and downwards, alone.'
> Panchi's mother said, 'That is the way men do it!'
> Panchi replied, 'Who told you?'
> Her mother said, 'Some day you will die by falling down in the dark!
>
> Panchi said, 'No I will not die. This is the reason why I carry big candles with me. The candles are so thick that you do not have to pour molten droplets of wax to make them stand. Once you light it, you may keep it anywhere- it will stand erect and show you the right way. (Adhikari 2020, 97-98)

In this conversation, one can witness Panchi has evolved by taking charge of her sexuality and performing desires through her subjective lens. The phallic connotations in the imagery of a thick candle that stands erect whenever she wants it to, show the superiority of her masturbating adventures that are way more sexually rewarding than her engagement with her husband. It suggests that an inanimate phallus is better than a real one in terms of satiating Panchi's bodily needs. Panchi's discovery of self-pleasure makes her empowered to perform corporeal resistance. In this resistance, she performs her sexual subjectivity and is not subservient to any male fantasies. Her engagement with her sexuality is scripted according to how she wants to feel pleasure and not how her husband desires. On the contrary, when she was introduced to her sexuality through her husband, it was forced because it was performed through his desires and not her bodily demands. Panchi's characterisation therefore stands out among all other characters discussed because she takes charge of her sexual needs and fulfils them herself. Interestingly, when she shares with her mother about this empowering act that makes her self-reliant and erases the necessity of a dominant male partner from her life, she denounces it warning her that it might lead to her end. This is a typical case of institutionalization of women's lack of awareness about performing pleasure-positive approaches to their own bodies. Carolyn Hibbs (2018) deconstructs how the limitations in education and internalization of Brahminical restrictions on women's bodies and sexuality have led to a generational re-

iteration. Hibbs claims that women by imposing on other women the legacy they have observed on their bodies, “gain perceived power” which they lack otherwise in the large scheme of things (284). Hibbs terms this re-iteration of female shame, corporeal restriction, and ignorance as “bodily illiteracy” (ibid). Thus, when Panchi’s mother does not support her self-reliance for bodily pleasure, she passes on the repercussions of such bodily illiteracy and re-iterates the Brahminical script of corporeal restriction even within her own domestic boundaries. Panchi's opposition to her mother’s skepticism regarding her practice of female masturbation breaks this curated system of patriarchal inflictions. She channelizes her agency into being solely responsible for her hunger, both for food and pleasure.

3.3. Summary

The questions of the subaltern female body render one with the idea of how interlinked the notions of caste, tribe, and female body politics are. It is important to understand how these vectors of social identity have major implications on the female body since it is the foremost tool to be inscribed with communal culture. This makes women’s bodies sites where patriarchal, caste, and class dominances are observed. The exclusive challenges of the female body that comes from a marginalized and exploited community are urgent for this discussion. And these exclusivities in corporeal oppression are not even uniform across every marginalized space. The Bonda woman’s nudity and Mahasweta Devi’s (2018) Draupadi’s nudity are performed in two very different contexts. While Devi’s Draupadi chooses to be naked with her bruised body, adamant on being recorded in history, the Bonda woman simply follows her cultural code which supposedly ensures her community’s prosperity. While Draupadi has access to perform rebellion and resists the system to erase her corporeality, the Bonda character of Adibari who dares to do things differently is made an outcast and erased from the collective memory of the community. Both Adibari and Mainao are corporeally punished for taking up the attire of the dominant communities. While Adibari meets with hostility from other Bonda men who don’t bother to save her or go looking for her when she elopes which eventually leads to her getting raped, Mainao’s beauty is defiled with forced snipping of her hair. The socio-economic consequences for the subaltern female body lead to the trade of its flesh as in the case of Kumari and Panchi. While Kumari is bought, Panchi experiences slavery under the disguise of protection of marriage. However, Panchi performs her resistance by exploring

her sexuality and experimenting with the idea of self-pleasure. While Panchi could afford this experimentation, women restricted within Brahminical households are often morally shamed even thinking of attempting something like that. Panchi could attempt to write the script of her own body because of the notion that the subaltern female body is in the public gaze and has an insatiable sexual appetite however incorrigible it might be in reality. Panchi could afford to work outside the realm of domesticity that the Brahminical housewife can't. The next chapter thus explores the caging of women's bodily desires and pleasure within the upper-caste heteronormative spaces of marriages and widowhood.