

## **Echoes of Culture: Marriage and Identity in Gopinath Mohanty's *The Dynasty of the Immortals***

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### **Abstract**

*This article examines the marriage customs of the Kondh tribe, with particular focus on Gopinath Mohanty's novel, The Dynasty of the Immortals. By analysing the narrative, the article highlights the subtle social, cultural, and ritual elements of Kondh marriage practices. The author's narration vividly portrays the tribe's cultural identity, emphasising marriage as a cornerstone of Kondh tribal society. This paper seeks to contribute to the understanding of tribal marriage traditions and their representation in the novel The Dynasty of the Immortals, thereby deepening appreciation for the cultural identity of the Kondh tribe. Sociologists and anthropologists, including George Peter Murdock, Stephanie Coontz, Nadeem Hasnain, and L. P., conduct various research studies. Vidyarathi, etc., have been consulted to conceptualise marriage and validate the research.*

**Keywords:** cultural identity, marriage, tribe, Udulia, rituals.

### **Introduction**

Culture is a collective aspect of beliefs, values, customs, practices, arts, and institutions shared by a group of people or society and transmitted from one generation to the next. Culture is the way of life that a group of people adheres to. On the other hand, identity refers to how an individual defines themselves

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and distinguishes themselves from others. Culture is important to communities, as it defines collective identity. Cultural identity is vital because it shapes our understanding and responses, preserves history, and provides individuals with a sense of belonging.

Cultural identity refers to the sense of belonging, attachment, or relationship that people or groups may share with a specific culture or social group. This identity develops on the basis of shared values, beliefs, customs, language, traditions, and historical experiences. Cultural identity is individual and collective. It is about how people see themselves and how they relate to communities and societies. It is fluid, changing over time through diffusion or individual transformation. Stuart Hall states that cultural identity is a process of identification that is always constructed in specific historical, cultural, and social conditions (Hall 223).

Marriage plays a fundamental role in the creation of cultural identity, the performance of social functions, the protection of traditions, and the development of community bonds. Marriage ceremonies are strong transmitters of cultural heritage to the next generations. Every culture has its own distinct rites and ceremonies. These traditions, whatever the specific clothing, songs, or religious ceremonies, are symbols of a community's shared values and beliefs and help reaffirm them. "Marriage payment is one of the most pervasive marital conventions in human history. However, how the local marriage market structure influences this marital practice is less known. Moreover, previous research has examined different types of marriage payment (i.e., bride price, dowry, and parental economic support) separately" (Du 103141). It also maintains the social fabric by defining the roles and responsibilities of family members, often based on dominant cultural ideas about gender, kinship, and social stratification. Marriage also gives all members a sense of belonging through the formation of family alliances that lead to community cohesion. Marriage is a social-cultural institution, legitimised by law and religion. It thus plays an important role in preserving and transmitting cultural identity from one generation to another. It is also a personal act. It is the medium of communication that preserves the cultural identity of a society.

The heart of social structure and human interaction is marriage. Sociology, anthropology, psychology, and law have long studied and debated it. It is one of the oldest and most universal of all institutions. Significant changes have marked its history, reflecting broader socioeconomic and cultural shifts.

It has always been a holy matrimony, a legal contract, and a social institution to regulate sexual activity, to guarantee the legitimacy of children, and to create economic and political alliances. Anthropologist George Peter Murdock, who studied the functions of marriage in social organisation and child-rearing, wrote that marriage is a universal institution across cultures (*Social Structure* 11-13). John Locke was one of the most important philosophers during the time of the Enlightenment. His definition of marriage was "the voluntary, exclusive union of one man and one woman, for life" (*Two Treatises of Government* 232). As Stephanie

Coontz explains, “marriage is an institution that has changed over history, reflecting changes in economic structures, social norms, and individual rights” (*Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* 125). The economic context of marriage significantly shapes its form and function. Such changes have also affected the institution of marriage, which has changed with the development of economic conditions and structures. Marriage is a basic social institution because it creates alliances and relationships between groups, thereby promoting social cohesion, explains the famous anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (*The Elementary Structures of Kinship* 44).

The establishment of marital relationships produces links between families and communities that extend beyond the immediate pair. It promotes the mixing of social groups. It promotes unity and cooperation. Marriage is pivotal to the stability and continuity of society, as it facilitates resource exchange, strengthens social networks, and brings different groups into a community. This perspective accounts for the functional importance of marriage in preserving these elements within society. Times are changing, and marriage has changed from a traditional male-female relationship to a same-sex relationship. This expansion comes as there is increasing acceptance of a range of sexual orientations and gender identities.

### **Marriage among the Tribes**

Marriage is a basic institution in tribal communities, and it sustains the social, cultural, economic, and spiritual identity of the tribe. The tribe’s identity and its existence rest on marriage. It is a pillar that reinforces borders, maintains traditions, and promotes unity. The institution of marriage, prevalent in almost all societies, takes on various forms depending on the culture. The Na people of China are the only known culture in world history that has not established marriage as the central means of organizing social and personal life (*Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* 24). Marriage, in its inception, provides a remarkable tribal feature and reflects its cultural individuality. L. P. Vidyarthi and Binay Kumar Rai write that:

Marriage is generally considered a contract by the tribals. This gives rise to a certain pattern of selecting mates, which is generally followed when both boys and girls are already adults. Due weight is given to the view of both the boy and the girl in the selection of a partner. Tribal marriage is generally regarded as a civil contract, rather than a religious sacrament, and therefore, religious solemnization does not take place. (*The Tribal Culture of India* 280)

Nadeem Hasnain writes, “Indian tribes, like tribes of other parts of the world, practise several forms of marriage as a matter of convenience and social acclimatisation in their respective cultural-ecological settings” (*Tribal India* 58). “In Zimbabwe, one in three girls are married before 18, yet no studies focus explicitly on the relationship between child marriage and mental health” (Sheibani et al. 289). Many women who enter marriages early do not leave, suggesting that consequences are likely to ripple across the life course. Monogamy, polygamy, polygyny, and

polyandry are considered the major types of marriage. "Polygamy, while often primarily perceived as a cultural or religious tradition, wields substantial influence over various business facets" (Youssef et al. 1018). A person may marry only one partner at a time under the terms of monogamy. The majority of Indian tribes practice monogamy. Polygamy, which means the marriage of one man to several women, is fairly widespread throughout the world. Indian tribes like the Gond, Baiga, and Lushai practice this type of marriage. Polyandry, which means the marriage of a woman to several men, is not so common among these tribes. This form of marriage is prevalent in the Himalayan region extending from Kashmir to Assam and is popular among the Indo-Aryan and Mongoloid tribes. It is prevalent among the Tiyan, Toda, Kota, Khasa, and Ladakhi Bota (ibid. 58-59). Nadeem Hasnain identifies nine common ways of acquiring mates among Indian tribes: marriage by capture, exchange, elopement, intrusion, purchase, service, trial, mutual consent, and probation (ibid. 62). Societies restrict sexual liaisons or marriage connections between select kin, clans, or gotras. On the other hand, it encourages marriage unions within specific kin groups.

The marriage customs share many similarities in the sociocultural setting of the Kondh tribe in Odisha. Gopinath Mohanty's novel *The Dynasty of the Immortals* depicts the Kondh tribe's social life in various aspects, including marriage. Marriage is a crucial institution in the Kondh tribe. It is the institution that strengthens family and community bonds. Their marriage customs fit their agricultural life and community values. Their customs include negotiated bride prices, elaborate marriage rituals, and the importance of family. These customs show that marriage is of economic, social, and cultural importance to the tribes.

Marriage is important to the Kondhs; it represents community cooperation and cultural pride. In the novel *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, the author presents the marriage system of the Kondh tribe of Odisha in a complex light. The novel explores the connection between marriage and tribal identity. The Kondhs are very close to nature and live in a community. Their marriage practices are varied and have evolved in line with their worldview, social structures, and cultural values. Within the tribe, these traditions vary from subgroup to subgroup, creating a fascinating mix of autonomy, symbolism, and ritual. Radhakant Nayak and Barbara M. Boal write that there are two major forms of marriage among the Kondhs. The first form is an arranged marriage between two respective families, while the second type involves the capture of a bride. Traditionally, there is no dowry system among the Kondhs (*The Kondh: A Handbook for Development* 44). Chitta Ranjam Mishra writes in her article that "There are two types of marriage systems prevailing in Kondh society: 1. Khincha Biha or Tana Kania, which means marriage by capture, and 2. Mola Biha or arranged marriage: (46). G. Divya Malika writes in her article:

Various methods of marriage exist, including elopement (referred to as *udulia*), marriage by capture (known as *Jhika*), marriage by exchange (referred to as *Kunda Marpu*), and marriage by service (referred to as *illarikam*). The practice of bride price, also known as *Chintam biyam*, is prevalent in various forms of

matrimonial unions. (374)

The Kondhs generally practise clan exogamy. Traditionally, marriage must cross clan boundaries, adhering to the incest taboo. The Kondh community strictly adheres to exogamy, meaning marriages take place outside the clan while remaining part of it. “A daughter was meant to go into another *gotra* after marriage” (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 15). The process of finding a mate is usually negotiated with the consent of the boy and the girl. “Overall, having a legally and publicly recognized status through marriage and public commitment advances cultural and legal justice” (Leung and Nguyen 1). Parents have no authority in making decisions about their children’s matrimonial choices. Negotiations will focus solely on the bride price, with the couple’s wishes given the highest priority. The following reference from the novel shows that parents only act as facilitators:

There was no definite decision on Pubuli’s marriage. Such decisions are also not common in Kandha society. Meetings of relatives and friends are held only after a couple takes a decision and after mutual meetings and testing. (ibid. 180)

Unlike most traditional societies, the Kondhs allow young couples the freedom to meet, engage, and establish relationships before marriage. This practice highlights their focus on mutual affection and harmony in marriage. The process usually involves village festivals or meetings where young men and women can interact freely. These events offer a culturally approved environment for participants to show their interest and develop emotional bonds. If a couple chooses marriage, they are advised to spend more time together to explore compatibility. In such instances, the couple can live together temporarily to assess the strength of their relationship:

What was wrong if long before the wedding they had started to act as husband and wife and set up their household? In the ambit of the Kandha’s happy customs, there was a scope for a man and woman to know each other intimately ... . However, all that romance was outside the cage of marriage ... . The Kandha married, to nourish that feeling and realize his satisfaction; so did the Gadaba, the Paraja, the wedding being just a commonplace advertisement of the joining of their minds after their physical union. (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 351-352)

And while the rest of India has arranged marriages, the system is based on individual freedom and consent. Generally, the families accept the couple’s choice. During marriages, the tribe performs great rituals that show its rich cultural heritage. This Kondh concept of marriage is an expression of their modern thinking about the independence of the individual and a pragmatic appreciation of human relations. It shows respect for and flexibility within traditional cultures.

In chapter sixty-three of the novel *The Dynasty of the Immortals*, Pubuli, Diudu’s sister, is secretly married to Beshu Kandha. Diudu’s initial disapproval of her silence and feelings may stem from societal and familial expectations for

communication and loyalty within the family. Seeing her distress, he relents and tries to soothe her. The following lines reveal Diudu's genuine affection for his sister as he reassures her while acknowledging Pubuli's choice in marriage: "After all, you would have married someday, and nobody would have got you attached against your wish. You have come to the man you liked. I have no regrets about it, so don't cry" (ibid. 345). His remark, "After all, if you are happy, that is enough for us," shows his consent to her decision despite the secrecy of the marriage (ibid. 345). At first, Pubuli may cause confusion and disappointment, but his happiness matters most.

The Kondh tribe also follow the *udulia* form of marriage, i.e., marriage by elopement with mutual consent. These unions emphasise the importance of individual choice and independence and often enable couples to bypass customary bargaining and parental duties. The *udulia* system is for couples who want to elope and marry against their families or communities. It's a declaration of their devotion and longing for one another. Elopement usually occurs after a period of courtship, when the couple has decided whether they are ready to get married. The community may not necessarily find such a union scandalous, but it does recognise the couple's right to decide on their future together.

The marriage of Pubuli, the sister of Diedu, with Beshu Kanda is a grand affair and a reminder of the tribal customs of love and unity. Pubuli and Beshu Kanda are tribal people who gradually fall in love with each other. In accordance with tribal traditions, their union is characterised by an *udulia* marriage, a usual practice in which the groom 'captures' the bride, symbolising their relationship. During a hunting event, Beshu, with the help of his friends, performs the ceremonial 'abduction' of Pubuli at a social gathering. Janjai informed Lenju Kandha that:

"Pubuli has run away for an *udulia* wedding with the Besu Kandha of Miting" . . . Sarabu *Saonta's* brother, Lenju Kandha, let out a roar that shook the street, and leaping up, he thundered, "What! He took her away for *udulia*!" . . . Gasping for breath and running, a group of girls came to declare, "Besu has taken Pubuli away for *udulia*." (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 295)

Although this elopement appears dramatic, it is based on consent and tribal custom and thus reinforces the community's cultural values. After eloping, the couple usually returns to the village, where elders and family members help to formalise the marriage. A ritual reconciliation usually follows when the families get together to bless the union. The community celebrates and recognises the marriage with the same fervour and devotion as it does other marriages.

Pubuli doesn't need to marry Besu in *udulia*, it is an expression of love and acceptance, showing her autonomy and will to marry Besu. The ritual is a symbol of their love and a reflection of the tribe's rich cultural heritage. In this particular incident, Mohanty portrays tribal life, the simplicity and symbolism of their ceremonies and, at the same time, the importance of love, mutual respect, and communal acceptance in their marital traditions. Mohanty discusses the interaction between economic problems and the cultural norms of marriage in tribal society. The

*Udulia* marriage is an example of the pragmatic adaptability of Kondh society. It also indicates the weakening status of women with little autonomy in these customs.

The marriage of Kondh tribals “was solemnized in the *Reti* conjunction” of the *Chaita* month after the harvest (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 61). In the *Redasi* conjunction, a Kondh youth sets out to find a girl of his choice. If he can't find a girl he likes in his own village, he goes to another one. Several days after Pubuli leaves for *Udulia*, the people of Miniyapayu come to enquire about her well-being. Tradition dictates that the girl's parents beat up the groom who eloped with *Udulia*, so Diudu follows: “As per village custom, they heaped a few strokes upon Besu Kandha” (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 342). All of this activity was done for the sake of custom.

The marriage ritual in Kondh society is also unique and curious. Kondh customs require keeping the marriage's holy water in a pitcher from the previous night to prevent prying eyes. It is the duty of the village *Disari* to fetch water from the river. Only this water completes all the rituals of the marriage. If someone's eyes fall on it while fetching water, then that water becomes impure; hence, the *Disari* works only on a lonely night. Before marriage, these people worship the village goddess, Mother Earth, religious deities, household deities, and ancestors. After both parties decide on the bride price and marriage-related matters, the wedding ceremony begins. Every person in the village participates (*The Dynasty of the Immortals* 356-358).

Tribal marriage rituals, birth rituals, naming rituals, and agricultural rituals are especially important in creating tribal cultural identity. They are vital for the continued preservation and dissemination of the tribe's traditions, values, and beliefs to succeeding generations. Rituals are symbolic actions that express a tribe's values and worldview through symbols, chants, and ceremonies, telling shared cultural stories and setting moral standards. Emile Durkheim, in emphasizing the role of rituals, observes that “rituals are a powerful means by which societies sustain their shared values and collective consciousness, especially in tribal societies where marriage ceremonies strengthen communal ties and cultural identity” (*The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* 47).

### **Conclusion**

Gopinath Mohanty's novel *The Dynasty of the Immortals* describes precisely and in detail the complex marriage customs of the Kondh tribe, exposing their cultural significance. For Mohanty, marriage is a community event rooted in the tribe's traditions and values, not just a personal union. Mohanty's detailed descriptions of rituals, customs, and social dynamics surrounding marriage serve to demonstrate how such practices reinforce the tribe's cultural ethos. By focusing on these practices, Mohanty demonstrates how marriage rituals help maintain the tribe's distinctive cultural identity amid broader societal transformations.

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