

EXISTENTIAL ANGST VS SEARCH FOR ESSENCE: A CRITIQUE OF SURENDRA MOHANTY'S THE BREAD AND THE MOON AND OTHER STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Surendra Mohanty is widely recognised as a foremost writer in Odia language and has around fifty books to his credit, including novels, short stories, travelogues, biographies, essays and literary criticism. He received the Central Sahitya Academy Award for his novel, Nilashaila (The Blue Mountain). Although he excels in all established genres, his contributions to novel and short stories are remarkable.

KEYWORDS: *Odia Language, Novels, Short Stories, Travelogues*

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INTRODUCTION

Mohanty's concern is with the world of ideas, ideas born not from abstraction, but from experience and facts. Critics have traced the influence of Freud in some of his writings. Mohanty himself states that some of his writings are influenced by James Joyce's stream of consciousness technique. In his substitution of extraordinary heroes for ordinary people in many of his writings and in his vigilant role as a writer against neo-colonialists in a post-independent nation, Mohanty anticipates the ideas of postcolonial writers, especially Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Frantz Fanon. However, his writings are not confined to any theoretical framework. The presentation of the ancient and the modern, the rich and the poor, the elite and the illiterate, the spiritual and the mundane and the amalgamation of myth, history and contemporaneity impart universality, authenticity and relevance to his theme. Mohanty's style is marked by loftiness, sonority and grandeur which are the hallmarks of his craftsmanship. His style is characterised by embellishments. He quite often speaks in a different dialect and idiom from other writers.

Surendra Mohanty, through his literary craftsmanship, has revolutionised Odia short stories written in the post-independent era by introducing new trends and techniques to the existing narrative. He deliberately seeks to present his characters in a largely absurd and irrational world which is rather suggested as a derivative of the inner fragmentation and rupture the inevitability experience living in a disorderly, chaotic world. Mohanty made his stories appear startlingly lifelike by his deft manipulation of the linear narration, by his reluctance to judge the characters, by his judicious, hyperactive attention to detail, and above all, by his disinclination to achieve final climactic moments in his short stories. Most of his finest stories are open ended and without having clear narrative resolution which necessarily point out the developing sense of incompleteness and disintegration that has informed the modern life in general. Aishwarya Mishra in her article titled "Voices from Odisha: A Symbolic Study of Surendra Mohanty's The Changeover" astutely observes:

His psychologically limitless description of characters is conspicuously sarcastic. He unfolds a monumental exploration of the disparate themes of fondness and hatred, slapstick and setback, helplessness and longing that mature

within family and societal relationships. He writes about nature and common men using powerful imagery and layman terms as if the incident is occurring right in front of his eyes. (357)

Each of his stories, therefore, serves as an emphatic onslaught against the rigidified bound of experience and strives to champion the cause of the unprivileged and the marginalised. His stories are poignantly graphic and often leave the audience with an overriding feeling of emptiness. He seems to eternally suspend his characters between the conflicting sense of defeat and triumph, desire and fruition, power and helplessness. He is the first to introduce symbolism in Odia short stories which helps him to subtly allude to the meaning of something without being overtly expressive. His descriptions of the outward, invigorating nature necessarily correlate with human feelings and instincts, and turn out to be indispensable tools for exploring the mysteries of the inner landscape of the mind.

Mohanty's style is characterized by loftiness and sonority, grandeur and pomposity. He is sometimes charged with employing an inflated language in his novels and short stories, but this grandiloquence rather stems from the profundity of thought and terseness of expression with which he deals with the complex emotions and feelings and the manner he continues to explore dignity and grandeur in the eventless drama of human life. According to J. N. Patnaik, Surendra Mohanty's fictional works "deal with social and psychological realities are based on the themes of encounter between tradition and modernity, erosion of values, feelings of restlessness, agony and suffering among the youth, and social tension due to generation gap" (71).

In his fictional manoeuvres, it is difficult to differentiate between the world of physical universe and the world of ideas which are somehow intermixed, and to exalt the one is to exalt the other for his ideas do not merely originate from dry speculation, but from experiences and facts. It is, however, impossible to place the author in a particular class or group as he deals with a variety of different concepts and themes that fascinate his thinking mind. His impressionist presentment of scenes does not seek to impose moral judgement on the reader irrespective of the occasional authorial comments and remarks that are scattered in his short stories. It is worthwhile to mention that Mohanty is always at his creative best in his short stories than in any other genre because nowhere was he so successful in sustaining the dignity and grandeur throughout, both in terms of form and content, than in the limited space of a short story.

The Bread and the Moon and Other Stories, first published in 1954, beautifully capture the existential angst of everyday living which is beautifully contrasted with man's eternal quest for essence. An overarching sense of alienation, insecurity and rootlessness is reflected in almost all the stories included in this collection. It is, however, interesting to note that his stories are not confined to any particular theme or subject which rather ranges across a wide spectrum of areas and concerns that earned him universal acceptability throughout Odisha. The title story, "The Bread and the Moon", is based on the perpetual conflict between the need to earn one's daily bread and the desperate craving for the coolness of the moonlit night that ails the common humanity in all ages and climes. The mighty walls of communism seem to crumble before the beauty and charm of human life which cannot simply be reduced to a formula of production and distribution. The story finally explores the fact that the established tenets of communism, that has rendered the bread more attractive than the moon, ultimately fails to grasp the real problems that actually concern the mankind. It provides a constructive critique of the Marxist philosophy by exposing its lack of concern about human feelings and sentiments and its overindulgence on the centralising economic indicators as the only determinants of common welfare. Mohanty finally concludes:

Lalita realised as though the bright, ever-charming life, that nature has to offer amid a thousand uproarious struggles for existence, was but a fierce onslaught against the insufficiency, bleakness and conflictual tendencies embodied in the theory and praxis of Marxism. (11)

The leadership of Binod, the local communist leader, was really commendable in organising the masses and inspiring a revolt against the exploitative capitalists. Lalita used to praise Binod's integrity and his erudition on Marxist philosophy. When Binod was busy with his party bulletin, Lalita's curious mind began to be fascinated by the beauty and charm of the moonlit night. Looking wearily at the framed photograph of Marx, hanging on the wall of the party office, Lalita was given to musing as to whether the bread was more fascinating than the glowing moon. Is sustenance the only aim of the human life on earth? She enquired from Binod if Marx had said anything about the moonlight night anywhere?

The soulful, intoxicating music of the flute suddenly reverberated along the landscape where Binod and Lalita were taking their moonlight walk. They were startled at the cheerfulness and vivacity of the two young girls namely Nayana and Kajari, enjoying them in the wilderness of the moonlit night. They looked content to the core with the plenitude of nature's bounties albeit they knew that they had to spend the night on empty stomach because of the launch of the strike in the mill in which they were working.

"The Bread and the Moon is structured around a corresponding antithesis between the real and the imaginary. Reality is highly desirable, but the delight and charm of living cannot be experienced by running endlessly after reality. Mohanty, in his presentment of this inner conflict, rather focuses on the mental dereliction and spiritual sterility of his characters which prevents them from realising the worth and significance of natural beauty. As Lalita powerfully contends: "... many struggles and revolutions had gone futile and become extinct in the process of arguments and altercations. Yet, this fine moonlit evening seemed eternally grateful. There was no end to its conduction of delight" (3-4).

Imparting freshness and novelty to old and familiar concepts and renewing the reader's lost capability for strong passions are Mohanty's specialities in storytelling. He is keen to disrupt the dominant narratives of established conventions and systems of thoughts by discovering the deconstructive presence of contrapuntal lines of arguments in them. The second story in the collection titled, "Underground" seeks to revisit the ideal of revolution and the sense of freedom imagined in youth. It's not inappropriate to envision the establishment of communism, but resorting to violence and bloodshed is largely unwarranted. The story ultimately exposes the true motive of Shyamal who has merely plunged into revolution to gain the love of the beautiful woman namely Lalita.

"Sands" represents a gloomy, dismal picture of the unlucky working class and the lower rungs of the society who even cannot manage to earn their livelihood with the smallest possible means. It highlights their utter helplessness against the inevitabilities of a cursed life. The story in its entirety evokes an immense sense of waste which is further heightened by the lack of any source of possible relief which makes the protagonist to wonder, "Has our world turned into a desert? Has it exhausted the capacity to produce food grain any longer" (29)?

The story titled, "Balloon" is a psychological melodrama in which Mohanty is concerned not only about the manner time fleets but also the need of an artist to recapture time in the present from the orphaned fragments of a long aborted past. The story is remarkable for its exquisite combination of youthful sentiments and intellectual awareness of the experience. The story is without a plot and almost reads like a modern poetic prose. "Sangri La" on the other hand, uses humour as a tool to undercut the intellectual pretention of the people living in an imperfect, impoverished world. It centres round the lives of four young friends who were living in a dingy rented house they named Sangri La. The lives of the inmates were heavily burdened in debt, and the rent of the house remained unpaid for months together. But soon they came to realise that all ideals and philosophies proved futile before the real struggle of life.

“The Soul of a Dinosaur” narrates the life and time of the despotic Brajeshwar who refuses to strike a compromise with the changing time. His character is portrayed as an enormous unsatisfied soul that perpetually longs for the lost magnificence and grandeur of monarchy. He is perhaps the only character in this collection of short stories who genuinely detest affecting artificiality in his demeanour and does not hesitate to pass acid comments on the drawbacks of democracy. Thus when the tiny beauty spot under Sundari’s lips was accidentally smudged by her hand, drawing a black line across her chin, he exclaimed, “there was absolutely no necessity of painting a rose with hues” (106). It is one of the finest stories of Mohanty in which a former king mourns the abolition of monarchy and finds himself as a rare specimen like the extinct dinosaur. The subject of the story, “The Fatigued Messenger” is based on an unforgettable episode of Hebrew history. The narrative begins with a beautiful description of the gigantic pyramids that stand splendidly on the sandy planes of Egypt and a series of rhetorical questions that begin to plague the mind of Hebrew Moses. It delicately dramatises a significant portion of ancient history in which the old exiled Moses led the Jews out of slavery in Egypt and ushered them to the Holy Land that God had promised them. Here Mohanty, with the help of an obsolete historic persona, has bridged the gulf between history and contemporaneity that serves as a wakeup call for the slumbering humanity.

The last story in this collection titled, “The Female Dancer” is an artistic outpouring of Surendra Mohanty’s romantic propensities. Backdropped against the construction of Lingaraj Temple by Yayati Kesharii, it admirably depicts the tragic tale of devadasi Purnima and the young sculptor Natawar, and the tender love that blossoms between them. Natawar seeks to immortalise Purnima after her death with the stone carved life-like figure which he sculpted on the wall of the Lingaraj Temple with great diligence. The story presents the eternal conflict between the head and the heart, God and the human, the physical world and the imaginary heaven. It works as a crude satire on the obsessed mankind who has turned a blind eye to the beauty and charm of human existence in their relentless pursuit of religion, temperance and divinity.

CONCLUSIONS

The Bread and the Moon and Other Stories, above all, are an appropriate vehicle of Surendra Mohanty’s broad human vision and ardent revolutionary zeal. The dramatic touch, symbolic language, graphic description and his profoundly eloquent and straightforward style lend a distinctive quality to his stories.

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