

Niranjan Mohanty: Revisiting Kalahandi Through Odia-English Poetry



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ABSTRACT: Niranjan Mohanty is an Odia poet who chooses to write in English. This choice seems to have been prompted by his profession. Being a professor of English it perhaps became convenient for him to accept English as the medium of his poetry. Besides being a poet of humanity the flavour of Odisha is quite distinct in his writing. However vast may be his canvas but Odisha conveys a special resonance. The land, legends, music, myths of Odisha have received special attention from him. Though the form he adopts is foreign, the content on the contrary remains quintessentially his own. This form-content disparity does not offer his readers any sense of awkwardness. That sense of divide is never evident. He seems to have successfully bridged the apparently difficult gap. His poetry is incontestably simple but sometimes it appears to be simplistic. This paper is an attempt to express Mohanty's humanism.

KEYWORDS: Odia Poetry in English, Humanism, Land, Legend, Myth, Kalahandi

INTRODUCTION

Poetry is not what is said or stated. The silences that exist between words make poetry. Poetry is incomplete. Its incompleteness is its continuity. Moreover, it continues because it is never contented. Poetry is pain, not panacea. It does not solve. It says. It is selective because it is bound by its form. Poetry is the crystallization of a particular subject out of many possible subjects demanding expression. Poetry gives form to feelings. In Niranjan Mohanty's perception what the poet arrives at is not the poet's choice. The poet begins and the rest happens. What is intended is not necessarily arrived at. The discrepancy between intent and arrival is very natural in poetry. It is not a disease to be dispensed with. It is its merit. In Mohanty's understanding the 'wrong voices' do interrupt while the poet begins with a specific intent. But those voices are not done away with. They invisibly merge with the main thought. Beneath the obvious remains the multitude of unsaid.

Kalahandi, the most unprivileged district of Odisha, seems to have helped him to articulate most poignantly the nature of poverty. Two reasons of such dire situation in Kalahandi are, as understood by Mohanty, nature's curse and political apathy. For this district and two more the image of Odisha has suffered both inside and outside. In "Kalahandi" the poet expresses his angst as the thought of the place and the faces of the people disturb him. Human beings have been reduced to bundles of bones. 'Thick-ribbed' and 'thin-naked' figures give the expressionistic impression of aged populace. The fossilized atmosphere of the place offers the surrealistic illustration of aging and decay. The land is absent of youth and color. The barrenness of the land appears to be undergoing some curse of unproductivity and aridity. The visibility of aging is evident among the inhabitants. Aging is all. Youth has never visited them. Everybody seems to have been born old. The patches of unkind cloud sometimes mock at its gazing audience. Mohanty uses a befitting simile of 'used hospital linens' to engender an image of the dead cloud, "Patches/ of unkind cloud lie along the floor/ of the sky like used hospital linens." The stillness of clouds in the sky of Kalahandi evokes the still life painting of Paul Cezanne. Everything seems so clinically still. The cloud appears to be a piece of painting sketched to keep the hope alive in the manner of O Henry's "The Last Leaf". It is just a providential sketch to hold the dying awake in the desert of probability. To Mohanty the cloud is as still as the used hospital linens. There is death-like stillness in the cloud. The people of Kalahandi are sandwiched between the cold wind of winter and 'bite of furnace-bright summer'. The poet's emotion over the condition of the people of Kalahandi forces him to question the very necessity of the existence of such infertile nature. The land that exists to burn and to burn to ashes needs to be dispensed with, "What is the use of such landscape/whose inscapes burn and turn into ashes?" The very word 'use' in the expression quoted above seems to be objectionable. It implies that nature is to be pro-human. It is to believe in the fact that nature is made to serve human beings and to fulfill human needs. The question of utility sounds out of place when it comes to nature. Utility implies values. The concept of value is a human construct. Human convenience is not necessarily nature's duty. Nature is because it is. It is not for or against anything. Its ontology is not dependent on anything. Therefore, the question raised by the poet

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is rhetorical. Human suffering prompts the poet question the indifference of nature. The poet finds no way to arrive at an answer to end the suffering of the people. His confusion concerning finding a solution makes him say, "What am I going to do with them?/ What am I going to do about them?" (28) The poet seems to have arrived at no conclusive method to reverse the status quo in Kalahandi. Therefore, he goes on portraying the state of things in the district. He reports the condition of the people there. He offers neither any solution nor any initiative. It is just a poetic reportage as is done by his contemporaries.

Government officials, politicians, doctors, teachers and so on never consider the land worth spending their time. It is a curse for them. The reason that they provide is the absence of facility. The land always remains below their dignity. To Mohanty's opinion it is not just nature that has turned hostile but the people as well have their fair share to collectively demonize the place, "It's full of diseases and diatribe,/ saw-dust of debris and dung." The poet's satire is quite corrosive when it comes to the callousness of the politicians. The latter's tour is very carefully arranged specially during the time of election. Beyond that Kalahandi does not exist. The very thought of subsequent tours to Kalahandi upsets their mood because their vehicles might get damaged and their health as well if such a venture is undertaken. Such is the mindset of the politicians, "What would happen/ to our cars, what would happen to our health?" The people of Kalahandi undergo two tragedies – one from nature and the other from the politicians. Those they voted to represent never represented them. That is the irony which Mohanty has successfully conveyed in this poem.

Kalahandi often remains a matter of ritual for the journalists and the politicians. The former visits to take a few clicks of poverty which cover the opening pages of a few newspapers. Such coverage does not go in vain. It has its impact. It inspires a series of discussions. A few constructive suggestions are taken to improve the condition of the people of Kalahandi. Media highlights those possible measures. And then Kalahandi is forgotten until the next election. This is what has been the fate of Kalahandi. Nothing has really happened except reporting. This is what seems to be Mohanty's perception of the state of affairs concerning the Kalahandi's destiny. Mohanty visualizes poverty when he narrates the condition of an old woman. The skeletal body of that woman sinks on the veranda after days of starvation, "An old woman on the verandah:/ her eyes shrunken and dim; her/ feather-thin arms lying listlessly/ on her lap, as though they were twigs/ fallen from a thunder-struck tree;". The metaphor of 'twigs' quite aptly conveys the constant dose of poverty which has thinned a body to mere bones. Mohanty here has found a proper objective correlative to the condition in Kalahandi. He has brought out the true complexion of poverty by employing this metaphor.

Mohanty has also emphasized on the fact of suicide in Kalahandi. Suicide is not just an exceptional and eye-brow raising incident there. The unnatural is quite natural there. The bite of poverty is so hard that they prefer suicide as the most befitting way to escape from the fact of life, "Last month, my son Shome hanged/ himself from that old banyan. His wife/ followed him. Their daughter, stung by absences/ and hunger, sleeps over there." Hunger humiliates the people and snatches from them their rights to live. When life is at stake, prostitution and sale of children become common. Human beings under the acidic impact of poverty are reduced to commodities. The object-content replaces the human-content. Humanity does not fit in there. Hunger has eclipsed it completely. Under the shadow of life they live a life.

In Kalahandi nature plays hide and seek. The river exists namesake. Clouds do appear to humiliate. Dry stumps of twisted and anaemic trees and a few thorny nameless plants are its vegetation and constitute its landscape. It is a land of dead. The images of death are ubiquitous in the place. It is a land which nourished no hope. The fodders for the cows are paper scraps and linen. The dry cracked bottoms of the pools are the earth's hungry gaze to the azure eternity. The land seems to have been caught in the myth of expectation from the beginning of time. To live there is to expect and to die. The expectation of difference continues unendingly. Nothing happens there as was in the landscape on Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. It is just waiting to see if anything happens. But nothing happens. It is only 'if' that happens. If anything happens it is the fire that always licks the bones. The poet confesses his apparent inability to do something for the dying multitude. He puts Kalahandi in his poetry for the knowledge of his contemporary and posterity. This is his service to the dying population of Kalahandi. He gave language to the suffering of the people.

Mohanty compares the grave grey sky over Kalahandi with the colorless face of a widow. The sky carries no color. It carries no hope. The parched stones on the mountain tops engender the images of vulture waiting for their fodder. It is the land of vultures which never end their feast. And finally, the apparently pessimistic tone of the poet sounds softer in the end. The fountain of hope never dies down. The poet supposes that there would one day be the rise of a soothing sun which would turn humane. The dying would rise up to their strength. Mohanty proposes the prospects of optimism in the concluding lines of his poem, "Surely, the sun would rise./ reddening the lofty thighs/ of jungles, once again./ Lo, the lost horizons of brightness/ reappear, the birds swinging in the air." The new sun would rejuvenate the decaying remains. This is the poet's optimism at the heart of a bleak environ. History would not tolerate the persisting normativity of the status quo. It would rebel. The time is in making. It is gathering dust. Once the condition is found, the reaction would not remain far. In terms of nature's *modus operandi*, nothing remains constant. Nature believes in variables. It is not nature's nature to promote constants. Mohanty perhaps tries to assuage the time-tired people the possibility of difference. The face of nature that one sees can never remain the same forever. Constancy is not nature's colour.

Mohanty's criticism of the nation's failure to improve fundamentally, even after its fifty years of history, post-Independence is conspicuous in "After Fifty Years". Kalahandi has never seen the light of change. It is still groping through darkness in search of

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the door of light. Children chew there paper scraps and women roots. Neither evening nor morning carries any relief. They go unnoticed as the burden of life appears too pressing. Thirst has silenced even the bird to sing. Silence seems to be its only language. Thirst and hunger have stolen their voices. The desolate land is locked in some strange silence. Cows offer no milk. Children go rickety. Hospitals are just haunted houses where doctors and equipment never arrived, "Hospitals cure no diseases./ Death-traps everywhere." Death appears so cheap and unalarming. Half a meal seems more valuable than life itself. This is the level to which the nation has come down to. Their destiny is tied to dust dung and death. This is level to which the nation has come down to. Here the poet reviews the history of the nation and to his dismay finds it in a state of complete disarray.

"A Certain Change" bears the poet's perception of pain. The poet confesses his inability to understand the logic of pain. He writes, "Time and again/ I open the geometry book of pain,/ not knowing how to read its pages." Pain has no logic. Existence implies pain. They are co-existent and co-terminus. Where there is life there is pain. Life is not pain. It is certainly painful. Pain is human. Pain animates. That defines humans as different from the world of inanimate. Pain is a symptom. It is just a visible exterior of the massive iceberg inside. It is the preface of a problem. Pain is poetry of the self. Pain suggests human limit. Pain is evidence of human contingency. Pain indicates asymmetry. It is asymmetry of the self. The poet visits and revisits the geometry book of pain. But the content of pain remains enigmatic. That enigma of ontology of pain stands beyond his comprehension. The self surrenders. 'Why pain?' is an eternal question. All religions have given their prescriptive hermeneutics of pain. Scriptures have their proprietorial take on it. But nothing sounds convincing. The surplus doubt still exists. Therefore, the poet in his own way tries to make sense of it. But he fails to fathom that secret.

The increasing corruption and poverty displease the poet. He complains the Lord for the persistence of such evils. The purity of priests is questionable, "The priest in the temple smells of/ garlic and gin." The one who serves the Lord is impure and unscrupulous. This is what seems to have disturbed the poet. The ministers sit on the 'mountains of money'. The doctors who are duty-bound to save the lives of the people have become instruments of death. There is trust-deficit felt everywhere. Officials go corrupt so easily. The necessity of ethical uprightness is now the subject matter of stories and legends. It is not practiced now. Kalahandi always remains a neglected land and never sees the light of civilization. There seems to be a deliberate attempt to disregard the dignity of the people of Kalahandi. In Kalahandi the father sells away his only daughter to make his tongue feel the presence of a slice of bread. The anti-socials thrive in the land of Kalahandi because they can purchase the human-commodity in the lowest price. Human trafficking flourishes in leaps and bounds. It happens under the broad daylight. Here the question arises in the mind of the poet as to why the Lord is deaf to such inhuman undertakings. The hearth never feels the warmth of fire for days. The parched earth is left abandoned like that of a carcass. Women in the villages rapidly age like pieces of rotten bamboo in a village pool, "Farmers migrate/ to the city of steel. Like rotten/ bamboos in a village pool, the women. Oh Lord! Save my countrymen." Children sleep naked in the streets under the giant and intimidating shadow of the skyscrapers. Beggary and malnutrition are very much evident at His doorstep.

However, looking at the trajectories of Mohanty's poetry as given above and his concerns and commitments, the fact of him being a humanist is inarguably established. The commitment he has shown towards the promotion of humanity is indisputably praiseworthy. Humanism is not the agenda but the essence of his poetry.

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