



BEYOND THE FACE: A CRITICAL READING OF THE POEMS OF APARNA MOHANTY THROUGH THE LENS OF ECOCRITICISM

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ABSTRACT

In India the increasing economic development and rapidly growing population that has taken the country from 300 million people in 1947 to more than one billion people today is putting a strain on the environment, infrastructure, and the country's natural resources. Industrial pollution, soil erosion, air, water and soil pollution, deforestation, resource depletion, degradation of public health and loss of biodiversity are some of the worsening problems caused by rapid industrialization and urbanization. Odisha, basically known as an agrarian state, tends to boost its economy with the presence of modern infrastructural facilities. It is witnessing unprecedented investment, both domestic and foreign. Thus the proliferation of high urbanization and industrialization causes the environmental pollution. All these recent social and environmental changes have been painted in the Odia literature of the recent years. Aparna Mohanty as a representative odia women poet narrates such environmental concern in her poems that needs scholarly interest and research. The present study is a step towards such need.

Key words: industrialization, urbanization, ecological concern, ecocriticism

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INTRODUCTION

Portrayal of nature in the domain of literature is an age old conviction. Nature as a source of awe and wonderment, a source of beauty and divinity and a source of solace and inspiration has captured literary sensibility since ages. However, with passage of time, specifically after industrial civilization, nature has been treated as a means of profit and accumulation. This attitude gradually led to ecological erosion and environmental crisis. In the late seventeenth century, the naturalist John Evelyn warned the Royal Society that English deforestation had reached epidemical proportions. It was during the Romantic era, which witnessed a sharp rise in urban populations and an increasingly industrialized economy, that environmental problems became

much more severe and noticeable, taking on a new sense of urgency. Indeed, the modern concept of 'ecology' was not introduced until 1866, when Charles Darwin's German disciple, Ernst Haeckel, first coined the word itself to identify 'that branch of biology which deals with the relations of living organisms to their surroundings' (Hutchings, 2007). By the later part of twentieth century there was a widespread realization that the earth was in an environmental crisis, brought on by the industrial and chemical pollution of the 'biosphere', the depletion of forests and of natural resources, the relentless extinction of plant and animal species, and the explosion of the human population beyond the capacity of the earth to sustain it (Abrams, 2007).

The concern for ecology has only recently caught the attention of the writers. It is this sense of concern and its reflection in literature that has given rise to a new branch of literary theory, namely Ecocriticism (Shikha, 2011). As declared by Glotfelty in *The Eco-criticism Reader* (1996), 'ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies.' Since its origin in the west, it took the whole western literary canon under its consideration. It evaluated how the texts and ideas are useful in responding to the environmental crisis. This ecological concern, thus, has become a huge cry in literary writings at all levels. Odia literature of the recent years is not far away from it. This study is an endeavor to analyze the poems of a representative Odia woman poet, namely Aparna Mohanty.

Aparna Mohanty

Aparna Mohanty (1952) is a much pronounced poet in contemporary Odia literature. She did her master's in Oriya and her PhD in Oriya language and literature. She was awarded State Sahitya Academi for her poetry collection *Jhia Pain Jharka tia. Purnattama, Maa ra kandana Gita and Nasta Nari* are some of her notable writings. Her poems portray the stand of women in society, the suffering and humiliation they face in the patriarchal society, men-women relationship, the attitude of women towards sexuality etc. However, some of her poems voice political situations of Odisha and at the same time they throw light on environmental degradation caused by the state policies.

DISCUSSION OF HER POEMS

Pusha Masha (Month of harvest) (*Maa ra Kandana Gita*, 2010) interestingly holds the whole thought process of the state while dealing with the people who become the victims of the development-induced displacements. By giving a voice to the state machinery and making it to speak its mind, the poet smartly brings out the actual purpose and the ends of such developments.

The speaker is not happy about the development, a development that comes at the cost of human right violation and environmental degradation. This concern is rather presented in the poem in a satirical manner. The poet satirizes the state machinery that is at the root of such violation

and degradation. The strong ecological concern is presented in the third stanza of the poem. Here the speaker hints how displacement of the people from their homeland and lease of mines, hills, mountains, land, forest, coastlines etc to the MNC's at very cheap costs are made in the name of development. This process of development leads to environmental degradation:

*Deshara bikash payi ta
Pabanare misei dabaku hue
Chiminira kaladhuan.
Nayipanire bisha.
Deshara bikash payita
Balipaduthiba pahada
Tali paduthiba gachhara
Raktare, tolahue
Rajadhanire uaasa.*

In this stanza the poet says that the present developmental process brings about air and water pollution caused by black smoke from chimneys and industrial wastes. The poet also notices the sacrifice of hills, lands and trees for development. This is implied by *tolahue rajadhanire uaas* (construction of palaces in the State capital) over the blood of *balipaduthiba pahada* (sacrificed mountains) and *talipaduthiba gaccha* (demolished trees). These expressions testify the poet's sorrow over human mis-actions on nature. Her pathetic fallacy is alert towards treating nature as ecology inciting her to personify mountains and trees as human beings. The selection of the metaphors such as 'sacrifice,' 'demolished' and 'bleeding' for the degrading environment, proves as apt objective correlatives to voice Mohanty's concern for the environmental degradation and ecological imbalances.

The poem *Bisha jagyan* (Yajna of Poison) (*Maa ra Kandana Gita*, 2010) is a satire which bitterly accuses human greed as the main drive behind poisoning everything from the space of nature to the space in human heart. Throughout the poem we are introduced to inexplicit *semane* (they) who have the power to produce, preserve and propagate this *bisha* (poison). They spend the entire state fund to produce the 'poison' in laboratories in a time when the people are dying of hunger, disease and jealousy. Ironically the so called 'poison' has the potential to destroy the entire world in a blink:

Mo payi
Gacchita acchi
Matire bisha
Panire bisha
Pabanare bisha
Manishara bidyare
Buddhire bisha.....

Here the poet finds 'poison' everywhere - in the earth, the water, the air, in human knowledge etc. The 'poison' that the poet here talks about may imply poisonous industrial wastes, auto-mobile pollutants, pesticides and other such substances used in farming and cultivation. These poisons are in fact the results of human endeavor to make their life more comfortable and luxurious. This 'poison' causes air, water and soil pollution leading to environmental degradation. The 'poison' which may mean greed for money and power vehemently plots to impair social and environmental harmony. The poem ends with the environmental concern of the poet on the face of ongoing degradation. She also acknowledges that she is the one among 'them' contributing to the process of degradation for the sake of fulfilling subjective needs.

In her poem *Sitakala* (wintertime) (*Maa ra Kandana Gita*, 2010), Mohanty uses the pathetic fallacy to present her environmental concern. Her pathetic fallacy is presented by the use of metaphors of pregnancy, motherhood and barrenness along with other personifications. The metaphor of pregnancy and childbirth is used to paint the picture of a fulfilling 'wintertime' which was once felt, has lost now. The bounty of winter is presented by the poet by using the metaphors of pregnancy and childbirth like *Haladi gori/Nua puati* (a fair, turmeric-smear, new mother), *garbhini khalabari* (the outer yard pregnant with harvested crops). Then the poet throws light on the experience of 'wintertime' in the contemporary time which leads to her lamentation over the loss of the intensity of coldness and natural beauty associated with winter. Now the poet finds winter has lost its luster with the loss of intense coldness dramatically threatened by human adoption to air-conditioners. Everywhere there is an experience of induced heat signaling the advent of global warming heading the environment and human society towards a fatal

degradation. The poet has painted this fatal degradation very aptly using functional metaphors and personifications. For example, in the expression *Udasa chhayahina/Pahadara mathanare tapa* (the heat in the shadow less and depressed tip of the mountain) she is personifying the mountain as a depressed human being beaten by heat. The change in weather condition due to environmental changes is also reflected in this poem by the shift in metaphors from pregnancy to barrenness and a shift in use of personification from a cherished nourishing mother to a deserted dry and barren woman. Mohanty has used metaphors and personification immensely as an objective correlative to outlet her felt experience of loss of actuality of nature interfacing global warming.

CONCLUSION

The study has found that Aparna Mohanty deals with different social issues mostly centered round women in her poems. Besides, she lends voices to ecological concern; degradation of environment and ecological imbalance. It is found that in Mohanty's *poems* she has presented the picture of the state policy and the development-induced displacements leading to environmental crisis. She has used pathetic fallacy to present the present environmental degradation. The change in weather condition due to environmental changes has been reflected in her poems too.

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