

The Place of Prafulla Mohanti among the Other Indians Writers in English

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Abstract: Prafulla Mohanti is a new name in English literature who was born in 1936 in the remote village of Nanpur, the Jajpur district of Odisha. The uniqueness of his writing is that he portrays his village, Nanpur in almost all of his writings as the main character. This paper makes an assessment of Mohanti and compares him with the other Indian writers in English.

Key Words: globalization and indigenous Culture.

Indians have been writing in English since the Nineteenth century. The early writers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Toru Dutta, Ramesh Chundra Ghose, Manmohan Ghose and Darojeo were not widely read. But these writers laid the foundation of English literature in India.

At the end of the century, Rabindranath Tagore bagged the coveted Nobel Prize for literature in 1913 for *Gitanjalee*. It heralded a new era in English literature in India. But the Nobel-prize winning Rabindranath Tagore was translating his work into English, as the political mystic Sri Arabinda and political poet Sorojin Naidu.

The early 1930s saw the rise of some Indians writing in English. They were Mulk Raj Anand, Ahamad Ali, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. These writers wrote about the social events of their contemporary society and followed the styles and patterns of their British counterparts. They were very much influenced by the West. The themes, characters and plots are of the Indians in nature but only the language is English. Though they were writing in English, an Indian flavour was coming out from their works. The first novel by an Indian set in England was *All About H. Hatterr* (1948) written by V. G. Desai.

All these precursors did not create a body of Indian English Literature or Indian Writing in English. Indian fiction in English achieved literary legitimacy in the world wide in 1981 when Salman Rushdie was crowned with Booker prize for his fiction *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie paves the path for the other Indian writers in English to follow it. "Rushdie Booker helped put Indians literature on the map, into the bookstores and on university syllabi. His works have been translated into Japanese, French, and Italian and into other world languages like the work of Prafulla Mohanti. He has questioned values and defended freedom of expression like Taslima Nasrin. He wrote an open letter to the prime minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi protesting against the ban of his *Satanic Verses* in

1989. He has altered the literary landscape. But there already was a postcolonial English-medium educated writers waiting in the wings in England, America, Canada and in India. Once the writers took their places onstage, they formed the backbone of what would become Indian Writing in English including the marquee names of Ruskin Bond, Upamanyu Chatarjee, Anita Desai, Shashi Despande, Amitav Ghose, Ved Medha, Bharati Mukharjee, V. S. Naipaul, R.K. Narayan, Nayantara Sahgal, I. Allen Sealy, Khushwant Singh, and Shashi Tharoor. These are the writers who have earned world-wide reputation for their writing. Once or more than once all were in the short lists of the Booker Prize.

It is difficult to define IWE (Indian Writing in English). A definition of English and of Writing is widely accepted, but what is Indian is a problematic and subjective. Uttam Paritosh decides that, rather than dealing with the ambiguity of parentage, birth place, present residence, cultural content of work, being Indian is a simple a matter of race. Contrasted with native vernacular-language literature, Indian writing in English writers are inherently non-representative of India except Prafulla Mohanti who represents his country abroad through his writing and painting. Hence, Indians writing in English writers can authentically write about a world filtered through second hand experiences, which is artificial and exotic. Therefore realistic IWE is impossible. Most Indian writing in English get the big publishing contracts and glamour, which marginalizes regional vernacular writing, linguistically limited one or two states. The India Writing in English writers are divided into two groups: the IWE writers based in India and the non-residence Indians (NRI) living abroad. The NRI writers create a stereotypical reality that already exists in the Western mind. On the other hand, the NRI writer claims that he can observe India from the outside, seeing the larger picture. Out of the four Booker Prize winners, Rushdie and Kiran Desai are NRI, born in India,

but educated abroad and return only for occasional visits. In fact, Rushdie left for Cambridge when he was 18 and returned to India for the first time 40 years later. Desai left India when she was 14 to live in London and America. Arabinda Adiga immigrated to Australia as a teenager and then went to Colombia University in New York, where he stayed as journalist. He only recently returned to India and currently lives in Mumbai now. Out of the four only Arundhatee Roy is a native Indian who has castigated other NRI writers. She says, "I grew up on the banks of a river in Kerala----- If you read other Indian writers most of them are very urban: they do not have much interest in, you know, air or water. They all went from Doon school to St. Stephen's and then to Cambridge. Most of those who are called Indian writers do not live here: Rushdie, Seth, Amitav Ghosh, and Mistry: they all are abroad, while I have never lived anywhere except India." (Ibid.) Prafulla Mohanti stands between the two groups. He lives in London and comes to his village once in a year and stays there. He has developed intimacy with his village for which he cannot help coming here. He is like Arundhatee Roy who loves and is proud of being an Indian.

Does a place of residence really matter when constructing a story? Literary history is filled with ex-pats writing about their home country from abroad. Is Desai's Kalimpong any less real than Adiga's Bangalore or Roy's Kerala? It is remarkable to note that of the four writers only Rushdie had published a novel before his Booker, although not Indian-based in theme or setting. Prafulla Mohanti's *My Village, My Life*, is an exact picture of his native village Nanpur which he portrays it from London. Arundhatee Roy's was her first and last fiction, launching her as a social critic and essayist. Kiran Desai's novel *the inheritance of loss* was her first fiction, following a book of short stories. Arabinda Adiga is a journalist. His debut novel *The White Tiger* is written in the form of letter to the prime Minister of China. It is very much innovative in structure portraying Bangalore. Anita Desai, Rohinton Mistry and Indra Sinha are the writers of international repute. They were in the short lists of Booker Prize more than once. In 1980, 1984 and 1999 Anita Desai was in the short lists of Booker Prize. Rohinton Mistry has also been a triple shortlister (1991, 1996, and 2002), while Indra Sinha was short listed once in 2008 for the prize. Arabinda Adiga brought Booker for *The White Tiger*, defeating his nearest competitor Amitav Ghosh who was in the Booker race with Adiga for his novel *The Sea of Poppies*.

The other IWE writers have also created their own identity bagging other international awards for their fictions. They are Nayantara Sahagal, Sasi Tharoor, Alan Sealy, Githa Hariharan, Amit Chaudhury, Manju Kapur, Vikram Chandra, Raj Kamal Jha, and Rupa Bajwa. They

were the regional winners of the Common Wealth Prize, competing in the oddly grouped Europe and South Asia region. In 1994 Vikram Seth won the overall Best Book prize, and in 1996 IWE swept the prize---Rohinton Mistry won best Book and Vikram Chandra won Best First Book.

The Betty Trask prize has acknowledged first works by H.S. Bhabra, Amit Balasubramanyam and Hari Kunzru. On the other hand, back home there is an equally impressive body of work by writers such as Ruskin Bond, Upamanyu Chatterjee, David Davidar, Shashi Deshpande, Shama Fehally, Amitav Ghose, Indira Goswami, Quarratulain Hyder, Radhika Jha, Manju Kapur, Manohar Nayantara, Anita Nair, Makaranda Parrajapape, R. Raja Rao, Ranga Rao, Nayanta Sahagal, Kushwant Singh, among other. Most of these are well known. They have won awards and are best sellers. When we analyse the work of the IWE writers, one common thing is found that they select the Indian themes, though they are well acquainted with the land they live in. Bharatee Mukherjee, Kiran Desai and Jhumpa Laherie are living abroad but the theme of their works is Indian.

Some writers are there who have developed a unique theme of their fiction and non-fiction like Mohanti. One of them is Kunal Basu, an Indian Bengli writer. Kunal Basu's bulk of writing is small like Mohanti. Basu has written three novels and a short story collection, named after the title piece, *The Japanese Wife*. When his first collection of short fiction was published in 2008, it created a stir because Basu's stories were entirely different from the bulk of stories written by other Indian writers. Nearly all his stories are firmly based on Indian backgrounds and depict the Indian nuances of local sensibility with unfamiliar themes in his short fiction what Mohanti has done non-fictionally in his writing and painting. Basu himself called his fiction "the chronicle of unexpected" (The Sandy Herald). *The Japanese Wife* is the most remarkable story in collection. It is a love story, almost surrealistic in element, of long distance love between the two people from different countries and entirely different cultural backgrounds.

Kunal Basu and Mohanti have the similarity as far as the uniqueness of the theme is concerned. Before Kunal Basu no one has chosen a love story in which the lovers are from the two different countries and who have not even met once in their course of love. But both of them interact in letters and accept each other as husband and wife. The protagonist is dedicated to his love and has vowed to remain unmarried despite a heavy pressure imposed on him by the member of his family. Mohanti's selection of theme is spontaneous and natural out of his love for his village which is unique. A writer is not found till

now who dedicates his entire efforts to portray his village non-fictionally.

Mohanti like the other Postcolonial writers invokes the idea of social justice liberation, and egalitarianism in his endeavour to counter the authoritarian structures of racism discrimination and maltreatment. Postcolonial writing is suffused with suffering, pain, protest, and resistance experienced in history. Postcolonial writings accentuate the exposition of certain elementary oppressive structures in class, gender and caste. Postcolonial writings, therefore, discuss the problems and narratives of much of the world's marginalized class.

Mohanti is a Postcolonial writer. He deals with the problems of his time in his writing and painting what Kiran Desai does in her *The Inheritance of Loss*. She wins the coveted Booker Prize for this novel which portrays the ill treatment of the marginalized section of Indian society in the postcolonial perspective. This novel highlights the socio-economic prevalent in Indian society. It is a realistic portrayal of the plight of the marginalized, the domination by the rich over the oppressed corroborating Frantz Fanon's notion of dominance and submissiveness. In this novel Kiran Desai has made a committed and conscious effort in presenting the social reality of India like Mohanti. The narrative encapsulates the divide between the rich and poor, particularly through the judge and his cook Pannalal. The writer through the cook's meek and suppressed voice has attempted to articulate the silence of the centuries of exploitation, domination and oppression of the marginalized in Indian society.

The vulnerable section of the society always suffers by the rich which is the main theme of modern English literature. The work of Prafulla Mohanti, Kiran Desai and Frantz Fanon centre on the theme of power and pelf the privileged section that enjoys at the cost of the vulnerable section's toil.

Prafulla Mohanti's analysis of plight of the vulnerable section of society is related to the works of Amitav Ghosh who goes on writing about the Asian commoners and their social problems. But Prafulla Mohanti focuses the problems of his village that is microcosm of India as a whole. The works of Amitav Ghosh are based on the socio-cultural problems of the Indians and the Indian diasporas in other countries. In all his writings starting from his debut novel *The Circle of Reason* to his latest venture *The Sea of Poppies*, he traces the roots of the uprooting the people, their settlement and the conditions under which they are made and forced to migrate across the country and continents.

The Shadow Lines of Amitav Ghosh is an autobiographical novel like Prafulla Mohanti's *Through Brown Eyes*. In this novel Amitav Ghosh

tells the stories of three generation of his family spread over Dhaka, Calcutta and London. It lines up characters from different nationalists, religions and cultures in a close-knit fictive world. Prafulla Mohanti describes detail about his native village Nanpur and London in his *Through Brown Eyes*. He also brings about a clear cut difference between London and Nanpur.

Amitav Ghosh has offered a Heteroglossic identity of 'nation', nationalism and national identity. The question of borders, cartography, and ideas of the family that Ghosh raises shows how blurred, fine and irrational border can be. The border that we constantly creating both mentally and physically instantly fractured and sense of family that one conceived of. Ghosh tries to shows the multiple voices and raise multiple accents of the events of past, present and future. For this reason *The Shadow Lines* is a novel about time, about how perspectives about the past and the present can alter from person to person and from occasion to occasion, as the story leads to story and present and past slide into one another without erasing "shadow lines" between them.

Mr. Mohanti's idea of border is something different from Ghosh. Ethnocentrism of race is dividing the West and East which is not his personal experience but many incidents are there starting from M. K Gandhi to Martin Luther who faced many race-related crisis. The racism in the West often suffocates Mohanti for which he escapes from London to his native village Nanpur.

Time is an important factor for both Mohanti and Ghosh. When Mohanti analyses the past and present, Ghosh takes the past, present and future in his works. Mohanti sticks to past and wants the customs and traditions of the past to continue without any change. *My Village, My Life* is an analysis of the past customs, traditions and social values of his village Nanpur. Mohanti like Ghosh reminisced the social values of past which kept people united and disciplined. The present is painful for both. The change of social patterns, social relationships and social institutions devoid of values and humanity shocked Mohanti. The more the society advances, the more it rejects the social values of past in the name of modernism. *Changing Village, Changing Life* is Mohanti's apathy for present and pursuit of past. Ghosh's love for past is reflected through the character Tha'mma, his grandmother, who was born and brought up in Dhaka and wanted to stay there till she breathed her last. But the powerful time transferred her from Dhaka to Calcutta and from Calcutta to London. Mohanti's travels to London for his career and stays there permanently for a better life. He is despaired and disillusioned about a better life and wants to come back to his native village like Amitav Ghosh but cannot do so due to certain compulsions.

The present is painful for Mohanti as it is gradually departed from the social values and humanism of past which was the panacea for all sorts of socio-economic problems of an individual. The moral degradation finds its root deep in Nanpur in the matter of premarital and extramarital sex which is a taboo. Prafulla Mohanti's open analysis of sex and its consequence in his native village is like the Lesbian theory developed from the radical movements of the 1960s. Although his works are not lesbianism in spirit like Vijay Tendulkar's, some flavour of it is found in *My Village, My Life* through the characters of the village children who were found homo-sexually related to some elder member of the village. The children felt sex-like temper in them which was released by the elder people. Mohanti, here, analysed the conflict between the desire of the body and the morality of sex taboo. The same conflict is found in the novel of Bandana Jena's *The Dance of Death*. A beautiful woman has married two times because her first husband divorced her and the second died by the accident. She decided to remain unmarried. When she experienced passion there was an inner conflict inside her regarding extramarital sex and morality. Ganeswar Mishra has analysed about Homo sex in his *Face of The Morning*. Agadhu, a senior man, tried to have homo-sex with Kabi, the protagonist, while enjoying the Rama Lila show in Palace lane. Prafulla Mohanti's analysis is something different. The poor young widows do not have any younger members at home to support. So they are bound to approach to their neighbours. Taking this advantage the assistants assist them with money and matters. The widows had received so much of help for which they could not oppose when the assistants sexually approached them. The situation compels them to give the assistants favour as a result they bore the stigma for illegal conception. The sex and poverty are the main subjects of the modern writers, so Mohanti is not an exception to that.

In the matter of sex women are the centre. Their state of mind and problems constitute the theme of modern literature. Mohanti has gone deep into understanding the socio-psychological problems of women. He has analysed how the double standards the women maintain in the matter of sex and marriage like Anaya, the heroine of *2 States* of Chetan Bhagat. Bhagat has revealed the mind set-up of women who always maintain double standards in the matter of sex and marriage. Krish, the protagonist of the novel *2States*, is in the love with Ananya and wants to have sex with her. But Ananya directly refuses raising the question of morality of sex before marriage. Krish avoids her after that. She was in a search of the biologically desirable man who could satisfy her. Krish was a young man of sound body and sound mind. Without making any further delay she agreed with the proposal of Krish for premarital sex. The

morality she raised regarding premarital sex is her lip service only but she really wanted to have sex for her own satisfaction. Prafulla Mohanti's approach of love and sex is realistic like Chetan Bhagat. *2 States* is the autobiographical novel portraying the love story of Bhagat and his wife, Anusha, before their marriage in IIMA. Mohanti's discussion of sex and marriage is real and exact things what are happening in the rural areas. He is not portraying the women like the Shavian heroines of G.B Shaw who are equipped with all the traits. Mohanti portrays women as they are.

Realism is a major theme in the works of Chetan Bhagat, Mohanti and Rohinton Mistry which is more or less the same in case of Mohanti and Mistry. Mistry's conception of reality, mere description of persons and outward movement is of little significance. Reality is something that exists below the surface. It inhabits consciousness and finds expression through the characters' reminiscences. Many that are unachieved or unfulfilled linger on the border of consciousness. More often they are expressed through the medium of symbols. *Such a Long Journey* (1992) presents the full landscape of the city of Bombay in its ruthless reality, marked by poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, exploitation of the homeless that aptly suggests the impression of identities getting detached and disembodied from specific times and thereby assuming a free-floating state. *My Village, My Life* is like Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* which portrays a realistic picture of society.

Both of them are identical in many cases. Mistry started his career as a musician and became a reputed writer while Mohanti stated his career as an architect-cum-painter rose to fame as a writer. When Mistry could not stick to music any more, Mohanti could continue to be both as a successful writer and painter. Mistry's knowledge of music finds its reflection in his writings though he is out of touch from it. His love for music is depicted through the melodious songs: 'Mere Sapno ki rani kab ayegi tu' (165) and 'Dil deke dekho, dil deke dekhoji' (201) Painting is the life of Mohanti who has really painted his village through his writing.

Both Mohanti and Mistry are in love with their homeland. His love for his homeland, Bombay, is everlasting. Recreating a moment is very powerful in his writings like Mohanti. Reminiscence allows narration whereby the self of the writer is revealed to the world. The narration of diaspora is the narration of the self. Diasporic presence is dispersal, a scattering, a flight and has to take its root elsewhere for its growth and development.

Mistry dispersed himself to Canada and tried to create his own life's happenings through his writings as Mohanti did in London. He is a well known voice of Parsi community as an individual who wants the Parsi to preserve their cultural heritage before they scattered. Mohanti is the

cultural ambassador of Odisha who has globalized the Odia culture abroad and is heartbroken finding his Odia brethren derailed from their own culture in the love of West.

Attachment for home land among the diasporas becomes intense when they are disillusioned about their dream land. Almost all the diasporic writers feel homelessness when they find the west a waste land for personal relationship. So Mohanti felt awkward like Meena Alexander, a diasporic writer and poet living in America. Preoccupied with the questions pertaining to the origin, identity, loss, alienation, memory and homesickness, they very often try to interrogate and subvert the established authority and stereotyped notions. Rooted invariably in such issues, the following discussion is focused on Mohanti and Meena Alexander's distinct perception of the diasporic milieu pertaining expressed through their writings. Writers of Indian diaspora have produced a wide range of literature that entails the process of self exploration and bridge the gap between the past and present.

Meena Alexander was born in Kerala, is widely known for her distinct caliber to express the diasporic and feminist consciousness both the in the genre of prose and poetry. Both Mohanti and Alexander speculatively explore the subject of immigrant identity formation, impact of globalization, gender experience of the West and possible negotiation with the racism in a highly crafted manner. The poet, critic and novelist, Meena Alexander began her poetic career with the *Bird's Bright Wings* published in (1976), but as a serious writer she established herself with *Stone Roots* (1980). She has also polished her memoir *Fault Lines* (1993), two novels namely *Nampally Road* (1991) and *Manhatta Music* (1997). Alexander's autobiography *Fault Lines* deals with problems she faced in her life in the US after her migration to the dream land for a better life. She felt suffocated finding life a fool's paradise. She tried to come back but time had landed her in such difficult situation that she preferred a painful life in the US to a life of her own choice in India. She could not forget the land where her umbilical cord was cut and went on portraying it both internally and externally in her prose and poetry like Mohanti. The pain of living without fixed ground rules can be easily comprehended from her following statements: "And what of all the cities and small town and villages I have lived since birth: Allabad, Tirunvella, Kozencheri, Pune, Delhi, Hyderabad, all within the boundaries of India; Karttoun in the Sudan; Nottinham in Britain; and now this island of Manhattan. How should I spell out these fragments of broken geography?" (*Fault Lines* 2) Mohanti's *Through Brown Eyes* is like *Fault Lines* which are the autobiographical accounts of the two Indian diasporic writers describing painful life abroad.

Alexander's long halting in US could not make her a part of the land for which she stretched her poetic imagination to India for the theme of her writing. The same situation Jhumpa Lahiri faced in America. Though her family has settled in US for a long time, she has failed to accommodate in the American culture. She comes to Calcutta every year as Mohanti to his village, Nanpur. The flavour of Bengliness is found ample in her writings as Mohanti's writings contain only the savour of Odia culture. The term Bengliness refers to the incorporation of customs and habits of the people of Bengal who are also Known as Bengalis. Lahiri uses it as a tool to bring out the Bengli obsessions like the indigenous food, the typical Bengli names, ritual, endless discussions and debate in philosophy, music, literature and cinema. She also constantly uses her memories of the city of Calcutta as an instrument to awaken a sense of nostalgia and rootedness.

In the collection of stories entitled *Interpreter of Maladies*, three stories geographically shift to the root of Jhumpa Lahiri's ancestral homeland where her parents were born and raised. Her writing shows that whatever be the distance covered under the sky, however far one goes, one cannot easily break the root of the mother land. Lahiri has learnt to live by stretching her imagination to Bengal where her stories are originally rooted, and she is unable to cut off completely like Mohanti. Her roots are in India and she frequently makes a visit to Calcutta. It is a place she is quite familiar with and it is the place where her parents hail from. She loves this and has formed new relationships. Her trip to Calcutta as a child has helped treasure the most cherished moments of her childhood, especially the time spent with her grandmother. She says that "Calcutta nourished my mind, my eye as a writer and my interest in seeing things from different point view." (*Interpreter of Maladies*) Lahiri writes only about India, to show she has not detached herself from her motherland and her bond with India will always remain strong, even though she is associated with India only through her parents. By her frequently visiting India and observing people there, she was able to come out with three short stories: *Interpreter of Maladies*, *A Real Durwan* and *The Treatment of Bibi Haldar*. Mohanti and Lahiri are more or less similar as far as their attachment to the nativity is concerned.

Prafulla Mohanti has occupied a significant place among the IWE though he does not enjoys a wide readership. He is popular for his unique non-fictional writing which is a rare combination of facts and emotion in a remote village. He is further unique concentrating only on his village in his writings and painting. Mohanti has written four books; all portray his native village, Nanpur. His intimacy with his village does not take him to other areas when he writes and paints.

He is a lover like John Keats who loved and worshipped the beauty and found its (beauty) presence every where even in all objects. The love for Mohanti's village, Nanpur is found in every passage of his writing. Mohanti goes on worshipping his village as Keats worshipped beauty in his poems.

Like the Romantic poets of the nineteenth century England, Mohanti felt suffocated in the city atmosphere of London and returned to his village to enjoy the natural beauty what the Romantic poets did. Like Wordsworth Mohanti placed Nature above science and wants to keep nature and natural

elements unharmed in the name of development. Like Wordsworth Mohanti has attempted to herald a new era in non-fictional writing portraying his native village as it is. His non-fictional writing is a curious mixture of the poetic portrayal of his village and the love for tradition. His writing and painting are infused in the spell to transfer a reader to the land of his imagination to reminisce his lost childhood in village.

The new trends of non-fiction that Mohanti has created in literature will be popularized one day. His importance among IWE cannot be underestimated.

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