

Inveighing Against Inequity: Re-Reading Niranjana Mohanty's Poetry of Protest

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Abstract – Thomas Paine in the Rights of Man and Common Sense points out that every individual's duty is "to allow the same rights to others as we allow ourselves" and the failure to do so gives birth to social injustice. The Indian freedom fighters cherished the dream of a free India where equality and justice would reign supreme. India achieved freedom, but the dream of social equality and justice for all, still remains unrealized, be it women in particular or the common masses or nature. There is continuous exploitation every now and then. Niranjana Mohanty, the Orissan poet inveighs against such inequity prevalent in the society. This paper seeks to bring out and analyse the voice of protest in Mohanty's poems like Prayers to Lord Jagannatha, "Near the Temple", "Kalahandi", "The World", "Taming", "Bhubaneswar" etc.

"Whatever is my right as a man is also the right of another; and it becomes my duty to guarantee as well as to possess."

----Thomas Paine

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Every living being on this earth deserves to enjoy certain inalienable rights to live, irrespective of gender, class, religion, language, nationality pertaining to human beings; while the other non-human beings have the right to live as a part of the biosphere and for the benefit of the environment. However, there is often an encroachment in the sphere of freedom enjoyed by living beings. As far as the human rights are concerned, constitutions have been framed, laws have been made to provide equal rights to every citizen. In spite of that, there have been loads of cases proving that the endeavor of our forefathers regarding 'liberty, equality, fraternity' has only been partially successful in all these years.

Social injustice is the outcome of the failure to implement proper and equal freedom for all. During the colonial rule, the freedom fighters of India cherished the dream of a free India where equality and social justice for all would reign supreme, but the dream still remains unrealized. 'Marginality', is an offshoot of this colonialism which refers to the status of being on the margins. Everett V. Stonequist opines in *The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Cultural conflict* that a marginal person is "one who is poised in psychological uncertainty between two (or more) social worlds, reflecting in his soul the discords and harmonies, repulsions and attractions of these worlds; one of which is often 'dominant' over the other" (Stonequist: 1961,8).

Marginalization of specific individuals and groups, especially women, is a social curse and is a very common theme in creative literature, and Niranjana Mohanty raised his voice of protest against this. Women are always viewed as the Other to man. They are treated as commodities and objects to be colonized and this concern for women is seen in Mohanty's poetry. He protests against the ill-treatment inflicted on women at home and everywhere. So he observes:

Back home,

you colonize your wife's face

with thunderbolt-like slaps

as she opens the door. ("Taming" LL, 62)

Marginalization of women by patriarchy has drawn the attention of feminist critics like Judith Butler, Helene Cixous and others who are not prepared to accept any form of male domination. In the words of Cixous:

When I say "woman", I am speaking of woman in her inevitable struggle against conventional man; and of a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history. But first it must be said that in spite of the enormity of the repression that has kept them in the "dark"— that

dark which people have been trying to make them accept as their attribute... (Cixous: 1976, 876).

This continuous process of exploitation is what Mohanty has been trying to protest against through his poems. In the poem "Near the Temple" the poet once again highlights the condition of women even after fifty years of independence, in the so-called modern society—

Only last night, when the dogs tore the air

with barkings, the chief-priest's son locked

the beggar-maid in the prison of his loins; ("Near the Temple" OTBG, 66)

Like Mohanty, Kamala Das also stood for the marginalized, especially women. She refused to obey the dictates of the patriarchal society. Her poems candidly express such dictates of the male-dominated society to women which she resisted. The following lines show one such dictate —

[...]. Dress in sarees, be girl,

Be wife, they said. Be embroiderer, be cook

Be a quarreler with servants. [...](*Summer in Calcutta*, 60)

Costica Bradatan and Aurelian Craiutu in the article *The Paradoxes of Marginality* states that 'marginality lies at the very heart of human condition' and it has 'significant social, cultural, economic, psychological and political implications, the most deleterious being alienation and isolation'. In the postcolonial period the Indo-Anglian writers faced a most debilitating embarrassment for using English as a mode of poetic expression because it is the language of the Other. In spite of the political and the sociological pressure experienced by creative writers, poets like Niranjana Mohanty have proclaimed in self-defence their right to choose whatever language they may like to write in. In *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha* he asserts:

I choose to write in English, not to go

beyond the seas, but to meander here

like the light at the day's end

among the jasmine whiteness

of my ancestors

I choose to make it

My very own, my priceless possession. (*Prayers to Lord Jagannatha*, 75)

Kamala Das also experienced the same pressure and like Mohanty she also disobeyed the censor of the

dogmatic critics and promptly used the language of the ex-colonizers as her poetic idiom because it is through this language that she—

...voices my joys, my longing, my

Hopes, and is useful to me as cawing

Is to crows or roaring is to the lions[...](*Summer in Calcutta*, 59)

She uses English as a language quite natural to her just as "cawing" is to the crows or "roaring" is to the lions. In one of her interviews she said that she is afraid that she dreams in English too. This shows how much she is at ease with the language.

Mohanty's bilingual persona not only establishes his right to use whatever language he might use to write in but at the same time focuses on the glaring reality of marginalization of his native place and people. His heart-felt feelings for the neglected inhabitants of the district of Kalahandi is explicit in the poem. Kalahandi was an affluent place once upon a time but now flood and drought has become the fate of the place and these natural causes carry with it the trails of poverty and hunger. Mohanty draws the picture of Kalahandi very realistically as in the following lines:

Perhaps, the hearts go heavier here

by day, and the bodies, by night, lonelier.

Cattle chew paper scraps and linen,

butterflies flounder about black stones.

Rivers do not flow here. The pools

and wells never glow with the bliss of water.

No vegetation, no fruition

only the bones' hunger seeks an ascension. ("Kalahandi" AHR, 31)

Neither the Governmental officials nor the non-government officials do like to go to Kalahandi. Even the politicians cancel their tours to the place. Only "one or two rag-and-bone journalists" (AHR, 29) go there before the Assembly begins with "zoom-throated cameras" (AHR, 29) and make front page stories which are forgotten in a few days. Mohanty further adds:

Some voice forth a demand for a T.V. centre

in Kalahandi, some for installing industries.

Only the bellies entomb mysteries,

only the black cats sleep on the hearths,

only the piles of woes increase here. ("Kalahandi" *AHR*, 29)

Mohanty gives a very realistic picture of the landscape of Kalahandi in the poem. He draws a true picture of the hopeless condition of all the people there irrespective of their class, ethnicity or age. The fact that the physical environment of Kalahandi goes parallel to the condition of the people living there is very true. As a native of Orissa, Jayanta Mahapatra also experiences a deep bond with his own land. He also feels the pain, suffering of the Orissan people continuing throughout ages even though politicians have changed hands. The marginalized remain in the margins and there is no step taken for their improvement. Mahapatra states—

Tonight, the politician will turn

On the country with his power.

His face will be well under control

And tomorrow, sixty thousand children

Will go hungry

again. ("Possessions" *Shadow Space*, 24-25)

From time immemorial human beings have always tried to shape the environment in accordance to their needs. Man has participated in the physical and social environment for his personal and social benefits and quite unintentionally overlooked the harm the unhindered progress of society has brought along with it. Robert J. Bazell says in "Urban Health and Environment: A New Approach":

In the squalid tenements of inner-city slums—where children play in urine-soaked hallways alongside rats and junkies, where crumbling walls fill apartments with choking dust and deadly leaded paint, where often there is no heat in the winter and the plumbing doesn't work—the links between people's housing and their health are all too obvious. (Bazell in Kaplan & Kaplan: 1982, 419).

This negligence of nature and natural aspects has deteriorated the condition of the living place as days have passed by. Mohanty's poem *Ants* also project the same spectacle of deterioration. He describes his city as "the city of dust, debris and dung" (*LL*, 45). Yet he calls this city as "my city my, very own" (*LL*, 45). It is—

A city of beggars,

whose children tear the air

with their vagrant slangs and songs.

A city of mosquitoes

who conspire to grab their peace. ("Ants" *LL*, 46)

Mohanty points to the outcome of modern urbanization where a city becomes the "charnel-house of unopinioned fears" (*LL*, 46). The poet in Mohanty mourns for his "clumsy city" (*LL*, 46) of "hoarding, harrowing, hoodwinking, hammering, and whoring" (*LL*, 46). In the poem "Life Lines" Mohanty has asserted that he cannot "disown the past, the lost dimension of my own blood" (*LL*, 32). He has witnessed the groans of a cancer patient in the cancer ward:

[...], the hunger

of a child ransacking the dustbin

the leper's dripping blood

my village's insurmountable flood, ("Life Lines" *LL*, 32-33)

He grieves that he is not able to give his native people anything. But he asserts that he owes to the land and her people everything he has, his poems, his mornings and evenings, his "bones' coding" (*LL*, 33) his death's "invisible blessings" (*LL*, 33). The poem "Bhubaneswar" also voices forth the same grief—

There's no people here, only the stones

Cracked and cracking beyond repair.

Voices turn into groans and then go voiceless. ("Bhubaneswar" *OTYOP*, 79)

His city is the "city of silence" (*OTYOP*, 79) corrupted to the core where nothing happens without "the flutter of notes" (*OTYOP*, 80). This corruption is prevalent in all the classes of the society irrespective of the age and the ethnic origin of the people. The people have thus marginalized themselves from the honesty, truth and peace of life. They only talk about the rapid deforestation, the spreading of Aids, the drought in Kalahandi and the collapse of Soviet Union. But ultimately—

A scarecrow of nothingness

stares at us blankly

and we drown in another darkness. ("When We Meet" *LL*, 58)

However, Mohanty's concern extends beyond the disadvantaged sections of humanity and includes the natural and the non-human. He points to the

mindless marginalization of nature by human beings.
He questions his readers:

What place is this I'm living in?

What air is this I'm breathing in?

What clamour is this I'm swallowing in?

What silence is this I'm slicing in? ("The World" LL, 59)

In this context, we can recall a few words by Nandini Sahu in "Words and Silences in the Poetry of Niranjana Mohanty":

Alienation is the malaise of the present age. The development of technology, the growth of communication, the impersonal nature of public policies, the growing mobility of population, the changing family and corporate structures have vastly disrupted human bonds and connections in myriad unexpected ways and finally left the innocent souls vulnerable. (Sahu in Mishra & Arora:2010, 246)

In order to live a comfortable life man has continuously exploited nature and natural resources. But man has overlooked the fact that nature is related to their life. Any imbalance in nature will bring an imbalance in their life too, says Rajni Singh and Uttam kumar in "Orissan Culture and Landscape in the Poetry of Niranjana Mohanty". Such an imbalance gives rise to repeated cyclones in Orissa taking a heavy toll of lives. Mohanty describes this situation in the poem, "A Poem That Never Begins"—

And how that year

The flood took a heavy toll

Of children, cows, calves

Pregnant buffaloes, goats

And girls at the age of puberty

And cart-loads of unthrashed corns. ("A Poem that Never begins" OTBG, 47)

Born in a democratic country, Mohanty believes in harmonious concurrence with the people of his country. Liberty, equality and fraternity is the theme song of his life and Mohanty expresses this quite emphatically in *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha*:

I believe in peaceful co-existence

For I am a democrat. My blood

sings the song of liberty, equality.

My mind's garden is ripe

with the fruit of fraternity. (*Prayers to Lord Jagannatha*, 147)

The process of exploitation and exclusion of human and non-human living beings has been inveighed against quite rationally by Mohanty in the hope of a free and improved life for all. A poet is a social worker and Mohanty's poetic oeuvre is such that he cannot but resist against the domineering patriarchal norms, the proliferating social injustice all around, the unhindered and unethical use of nature through his poems. The poet, therefore, urges his readers to pray for a redeemed life for all living beings on this earth:

[...]. Let's all pray,

For prayer is the only palm

that assuages our agonies, old and new.

Surely, the sun would rise,

Reddening the lofty thighs

Of jungles, once again. ("Kalahandi" AHR, 33)

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