

## *The Creative Launcher*

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### **Mapping Indianness: Niranjan Mohanty's Poetry**

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#### **Abstract**

Niranjan Mohanty is a distinct and unique voice in Indian English poetry. His poetry is a milestone in propagation and popularization of indigenous cultural ethos and methods. He fuses together religiosity, modernity, contemporaneity and imagination. He has unflinching faith and devotion in Almighty. In his *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha* and *Krishna* he reminds of medieval devotional poetry. He represents God in different and unconventional manner. To him God is friend, foe, companion, animal etc. He is not reluctant in critiquing and exhibiting devotion to God simultaneously he surrenders himself entirely. Mohanty's poetry is full of mystic journey. His poetic themes include the poet's love for his dead father, the poet's grief over the de-generation that sprouts on the name of modernity and development and deep faith in rituals and religion. He glorifies the incarnation of divinity in the human form and records the pangs, suffering, longing, desire and uncertainties in love like mortal beings. The mythical references, images and symbols affirm poet's craving for God, culture and tradition.

**Keywords-** Indianness, Myth, mysticism, tradition and Modernity

Niranjan Mohanty has love for nativity. He has intimacies and involvement with the strands of tradition, culture and the history of Orissa. The Jagannatha temple at Puri, Konark, and Lingraj Bhubaneswar appear quite frequently in his verses. Mohanty initiated his writing career in 1977 and published eight volumes of poetry: *Silencing the Words* (1977), *Oh! This Bloody Game!* (1980), *Prayers to Lord Jagannath* (1994), *On Touching You and Other Poems* (1999), *Life Lines* (1999), *Krishna: A Long Poem* (2003), *A House of Rain* (2007), and *Tiger and Other Poems* (2008). His verses have appeared in magazine in India, U.K, USA

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and Canada such as *Chandrabhaga*, *The Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Indian Literature*, *Journal of Literature and Aesthetics*, *Kavya Bharti*, *JIWE*, *New Quest*, *South Asian Review*, *Hundred Words*, *Tandem*, *International Poetry Review*, *Suns Stone and Ucon Directory*. He has been awarded with Honorary writing Fellow at the International writing Program, The University of Iowa, Iowa city U. S. A. in 1994. Prof. Mohanty has translated a lot of literary works from Oriya and Bengali into English and Bengali into Oriya. Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi has published *Nirjhar* 2006, a volume of sixty poems of Jibananda Das in Oriya translation.

Mohanty reveals the human in him through his poetry. He voices for down-trodden people, prostitutes, victims of flood and draught. The meditative mood with the tinge of sorrow, nostalgia, the cultural landscape and the reminiscent of Jayant Mahapatra create magical effect in reading Mohanty's poetry. Mohanty believes that poetry is written for common man thus, he strengthens the common readers in his interview with Jaydeep Sarangi regarding theme of his verses he says:

To me, life itself is the central theme in my poetry. The mortality we live in and breath in and whatever shapes or moulds punctuate- time, death, absences, loneliness, the inner struggles and burdens of uncountable dreams constitute the themes of my poetry (*Contemporary Vibes*, 27).

The poetic volume *Oh! This Bloody Game!* deals with the existential concern of a growing child. The poetic self-analyses again and again the darkness and loneliness pervading within but the chirping of birds and light coming from stars and wild bushes are guiding the mind and body of the child in Wordsworthian way:

I grow rich with voices;  
the birds of their bliss  
flying all around me,  
and I forget myself.  
A dumb light from the stars  
guides my ways, my knotted ways. (BG 1)

In the poem "Oh This Bloody Game of Life How Did You Play Dad?" poet captures universal theme of a child strive in the growing age and father's over protection and instruction prohibits the growth of child. The dream and desire for complete freedom gets the

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face of existential crisis. Mohanty states the anxiety of the father and son relationship and establishes the two different perspectives. The child wants to see and experience everything from his own perspective whereas father by being caring and protective appears villainous to the son. Father cannot determine the destiny of the child; child has to pave his own path. Extra-care of parents restricts children from being an individual. Poet beautifully explicates the inner voice and lingering of the child for freedom which is necessary tool to learn the melody and malady of life:

O' dearest Dad, grant me then this much:  
a mind to meander like the wish of a river;  
a heart that hardens in the sun;  
and mellows in the melic moon;  
a pair of eyes to see the flight of birds  
over the seas; a pair of hands and a shoulder  
to beat the altar of my death; a roof to house  
my fears, a temple to worship your gods,  
a strength to feed the dead  
and a head to mingle in the common lot (*BG* 40).

Poet asserts that certain experiences in life cannot be insulated by the father figures rather it comes with time and experimentation. Ghansham Sharma remarks, "On the surface, the subject of utterance appears to be an adolescent, standing on the threshold of youth, while the silent listener or the other self of the speaker is the Dad, a symbol of age and tradition. The poem thus seems to represent the persona's strong desire to reject these oppressive burdens of his inherited tradition and to assert his independent and unified identity" (15). The poet seems to suggest that the process of being an individual teaches a great lesson of life. In the conflict between tradition and modernity Mohanty seems siding with the latter. Nevertheless, Mohanty nostalgically remembers his granny and his childhood days:

I whirl back to those lantern days,  
when my grandmother, swaying  
a palm-leaf fan over my seat-soaked body  
often brought me to sleep  
and dream of thirteen festivals

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in twelve months! (*Rains*, 97)

He wishes his father to come back to him and remembers him for the lesson that he taught him regarding managing the difficulties of life. Sudhir K Arora remarks, “It is the rains of absence that take him to the past which makes him feel the presence of what was no more or absent. The rains of absence falls on the roof of his house of rains and their sounds help in the playing the tunes of creative process with his poetic idiom” (194).

Niranjan Mohanty like Jayanta Mahaptra has constantly made an attempt to relate himself with his past, his relatives and his milieu imaginatively. He has the capacity to feel the sorrow and suffering of other creatures around him, on seeing the sad plight of humanity he melts and sheds tears to which he regards the rain. Mohanty in his poetic collection, *A House of Rains* observes, “whatever is past or passing/or yet to pass has to recognize /the fact that I am human to the core” (72). All the facets of life find room in his poetry. His portrayal becomes catchy owing to the sincerity of emotion and feeling. The generosity and sensitivity in him endear him to the readers. He made an announcement that the theme of his poetry is humanity. He has been successful in creating his own idiom, which is one of the parameters of success for a poet. In the foreword to *A House of Rains*, Mohanty states, “poetry enables me to connect; enables and enkindles me to relate myself to a flux that is inescapable to a center of faith that is indeterminable.” The sorry state of affairs makes him feel very intense. He perceives that humanity is in the grip evil and good is marginalized. The suffering of humanity makes him weep bitterly and he feels that he will be drowned in his own tears. Mohanty addresses to all the contemporary issues like unemployment, dowry system, rapes of the innocent girls, miseries of the laborers, and condition of widows, problems of farmers and dirt and squalor. The government data presented on these issues astonishes him. The boastful claims that India is shining and becoming global, competitive and advanced prove to be hypocritical and hollow. Ironically people are still deprived of basic infrastructures and amenities like drinking water, supply of electricity, medical facilities and employment. The poet expresses:

Mohan, my neighbour, the postal clerk,  
slept on the rails, failing to manage  
his extended family-four unemployed  
sons, five unmarried daughters. (*Rains*, 22)

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The problem of over population and insensitive approach of government makes the poet worried. Not only human beings but also even the lives of the animals are equally wretched. He states:

Cattle chew papers scraps and linen,  
butterflies flounder about black stones.  
Rivers do not flow here. (*Rains* 33)

*Prayers to Lord Jagannatha* is among the most celebrated anthologies of Mohanty. It is a long narrative of fifteen parts created a new paradigm of Mohanty's devotion to God and celebrates in his poem both humanity and divinity. According to Ashok Kumar:

We get an idea of the paradox of Infinite Power and Infinite Tenderness also, and for the devotee this gives real happiness. His first long poem, *Prayers to Lord Jagannatha*, is a paradigm of his experiments with meditation, exploration, devotion, and celebration of humanity and divinity simultaneously. Indeed, this exposes life and existence in its timeless community, in a mode of exercise which is different from other and exceptional to his aesthetics (321).

The lines are undoubtedly presented in the form of prayers but the creative mind has captured the noises and silences of everyday life. Lord Jagannatha's image is drawn differently. Poet is not singing simply the glory and grandeur of God rather critiques and questions him for the inequality and atrocities prevalent in the world. The beginning of the poem is unconventional. In general poets pray to Almighty to bless them for creation but he says:

Oh! Lord of the universe,  
burn my breath before I pray;  
tear out my tongue before I bray (*PLJ*, 1)

God is responsible for the life on the earth. He is protective father and guardian who is supposed not only to listen and forget the miseries, pain and *problems* of people but also to resolve. He wonders how God can live in repose seeing the ugliness of the world and especially the pathetic scene near his own temple:

How strangely you withstand people  
Around you- swearing, grumbling,  
Whining, weeping and praying? (1)

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Poet overtly depicts the prevailing doubt, his own fault and weaknesses. He also believes that God is all in one, he is the murderer, thief, magician and hero. To sustain humanity on the earth poet wishes to learn the tactics of god's secret art.

The metaphysical myth of Lord Jagannath is deep seated in the psyche of Oriya people. In large number they participate in the annual journey of Lord Jagannath with the preloads to *moksha*. Poet unravels in the whole poem again and again the strong faith of human beings in the divine presence. Redemption is possible with the grace of God only. The knowledge of sacrosanct authority of the temple is transmitted to the present generation by the ancestors:

Mythology my granny told me  
years ago, under the lamplight  
still rings in my ears and impels me  
to believe that you create us,  
care for us, rear us in rain. (62)

Mohanty's poems provide abundant opportunity to the readers to search the path of redemption from Vedic concept of various cycle of life. Poet visits and revisits God's abode for getting liberation. He enjoys his position as poet in conversing with God confidently. He realizes that he has freedom and right to fight with God to purge his impurities and drawbacks. He calls to God as coward and also surrenders himself totally to Lord Jagannath in the moment of crisis "I'm not clear in what I write/ I fail to grasp of what I chisel (74). Mohanty highlights contemporary scene, superstitious beliefs associated with God, the narrow mindset, high- low and rich –poor dichotomies. He is bewildered seeing the evil forces and untouchability, and also denigrates the modern ways of worshipping God which is affected by commercialization. He is certain that in the dwelling of God discrimination does not persist but he queries over lots of anomalies such as why people achieve success through wrong paths and God remains silent? The dilapidated structure of old temples and cracks symbolizes the polluted religious consciousness. The questions of the poet demand logical description of God's mysterious action.

*Krishna: A Long Poem* (2003) is an epic of devotion and love. Mohanty's Krishna is not a God but God in human form. He records human aspirations, longings, inadequacies and uncertainties in love since the lover is Krishna so love longing takes a divine tinge. The love

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of Radha and Krishna is embedded in Indian psyche and poet seeks to divinize them because of their eternal love and devotion to each other as it is mentioned in the prologue of the poem “Love is a human phenomenon/ we divinize it by living it”(7). Niranjan Mohanty along with Jayanta Mahapatra is deeply rooted in Oriya culture, myth and tradition. He realizes the need to establish a direct link with the self and surrounding in order to understand his roots, Sharda Iyer comments:

Mohanty’s accessibility to Hindu myths, legends, and rituals, his meditative awareness of the architectonic perfection and excellence of temples, his study of the Oriyan psyche, his sympathy for the destiny ridden faith of his fellowmen, his persuasive mode of depicting the varied counters of Oriyan landscape constitute the unsoiled theme-a song of his poetry. A poetry of mystery, mystification, a poetry of loneliness and hurt that gets redeemed through the innocence posited in those eyes. Man’s folly and guilt is redeemable through a living and loving faith in the living and loving Lord Krishna and Lord Jagannatha. (200)

Mohanty has projected Krishna as lover in the human form and deconstructed the myth of avatar. In Hinduism avatars are associated with the lord Vishnu who time to time appears on the earth in the animal and human form in order to save it from destructive forces. But Mohanty’s Krishna descends in human form to purify himself of divinity. He says to Radha:

Time and again, I assume human form  
to purify what id divine in me.  
Time and again, I’m born on the earth  
to taste the sweetness of corn or rice  
that are grown between the vale  
of your bee-hunting breasts. (30)

Krishna is ready to assume any form for Radha: “Can’t you see, I can assume any form or shape only for you” (35). He perceives Radha in every nook and corner. Radha is earth and the earthly objects are sprouted out of her love. Love has power to purify Krishna’s divinity and make him complete human. Krishna as God, creator of everything and pervading everywhere but without Radha he is lonely and helpless man. Love is most mighty it can melt and unite two parties. It is the source to revamp the disturbed balance both physically and mentally. Throughout the poem Krishna wishes to take human form and considers his divine



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existence as obstacle in the way of love. Arun Kumar Mishra remarks in this context, Krishna in Human form wants to live as a farmer with Radha as his wife in a remote village. He will till the land and work hard in the field and Radha would cook for him and serve him. The land will yield a rich harvest. This will inspire and encourage the people to cultivate their land to grow the harvest and drive away hunger poverty and misery from the world. He wants answers to his own questions. He appeals Radha to treat him like a common human being:

Perhaps as long as you treat me  
as divine, abstract, distant, dizzy,  
I can't get answer to all my questions.  
I can't solve the riddle, the mystery  
Of my problems as long as I'm not  
born in the human form on the earth (64).

The love of Radha and Krishna is unconventional because it is soaked in human experiences. Their love is earthly and free from binary oppositions. The spontaneous response to each other is self- satisfying and self- healing. Poet suggests that the earthly existence is ephemeral and the awareness of it should lead us towards love to utilize the life at its best. Niranjana Mohanty treats love of Radha and Krishna as a paradigm for every human being to show the soul's bonding which remains intact even after death. The poet expresses that the love birds are completely engrossed in each other and have forgotten the surrounding people as if they are newly married couples. Shubho Ray remarks, "Krishna adores Radha exposing the godly power in human as the sexual counsel. His compositions as a permanent aficionado of Krishna are poems of love of the highest order. His adulation for Krishna will move anybody, who is kind hearted, and his poems are really reminiscent to those who find their ultimate truth in love". (62)

*Tiger and Other Poems*, by Niranjana Mohanty is a remarkable poetic collection which unleashes the emotional and mental states of the poet. The poet recounts personal experiences that he has undergone in his life. Mohanty loves to remember his past especially his childhood days and sometimes he wishes ardently to enjoy the same though imaginatively. He expresses:

All these years those toys from the cave  
Of their sleep and silence, have watched me



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Running, jostling, stumbling, resting and running

Again, wobbling and wriggling, once again

From the quiet dawn to the exhausted dusk. (*Tiger and Other Poems* 14)

The above quoted lines reveal the robust nature of Mohanty. These lines indicate mental and emotional state of poet and at the same time innocence that he has nurtured to complete the full circle of life. The collection is remarkable owing to its content that reveals all the important traits of a poet like pristine heart, child-like innocence, keen observation, sensitive and sincere emotion and larger sympathy for humanity. His bonding with the birds, animals and other fellows is highly laudable. He makes good use metaphors, symbols and other figures with adroitness. Poetry to Mohanty is like his first love he feels a great elation while composing poems. Nevertheless, he is aware of the problem of readership of poetry in India and he expresses it as follows:

I know a poem moves nothing,  
not even dust in the columns of light.

It follows none yet it makes  
Something happen; it can light  
A pyre...

Where I watch how tiger lilies  
Become tigers and clear sky  
Becomes full of twinkling,  
Chirping stars.(76)

Niranjan Mohanty as an Indian English poet has made a very significant contribution by adopting and adapting the craft necessary to express himself in a lucid and fascinating style covering multiple canvas of life. His experiences are that of a common man's experiences which is why he has a universal appeal. Since, the poet feels transportation at the time of creation hence it is transfused among the sensible readers the same elation. On the whole Mohanty proves to be a true champion of humanity who wants to serve the elementary purpose of poetry that is to inculcate virtue, faith and morality among readers and make them better individuals.

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