

CELEBRATION OF FAMILIAL ANCESTRY: A STUDY IN THE POETRY NIRANJAN MOHANTY

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Niranjana Mohanty (1953-2008), a poet from Orissa is the author of eight volumes of poetry. His volumes include *Silencing the Words* (1994), *Oh! This Bloody Game* (1988) *Prayers to Lord and Jagannatha* (1994), *On Touching You and other pomes* (1999) *Life Lines* (1999) and *Krishana* (2003) *Tiger and Other Poems* (2008) and *A House of Rains* (2008) Even writing in English, Mohanty is not blessed with the question of roots or of identity. He is very much certain of his identity both as an Orissan and as an Indian. The entire range of his poetry is an exploration of his identity. A study of his poetry reveals his identification with the various aspects of his native land. In The present paper tries to show how he celebrates his familial ancestry and how the ancestors unite him with his home where he finds his roots.

Mohantry's poetry comes out of his sensitive understanding of the relationship with the ancestral figures of his own family. The poet's unblemished love and veneration for his ancestors make him a veritable quester of roots. Consequently his poetry abounds in the figures including his grandmother, father mother and uncle. Mohanty writes in an age which is characterized by disappointment, despair, demoralization cultural fragmentation and disintegration in every step of living. In this atmosphere he himself feels irrelevant and meaningless. He searches for meaning of life and gropes for the proper way to it. In his journey Mohanty is guided by his ancestors: his poem entitled "My ancestors" shows that:

A dumb light from the stars
guides my ways, my knotted ways

(*Oh! This Bloody Game I*)

He solemnly believes in the honesty of his ancestor's blessings showered upon him. Though they are invisible around him, his ancestors, like the huge sky overhead protect him and nourish him when he is alone in the vast universe. Mohanty nurtures himself with their philosophies of life and surrenders to their ideals. Doing so, he enjoys an unknowable joy that uplifts him from the stark reality to the ideal status of a poet. In the process Mohanty proliferates through poetry:

I listen to their hymns of love
and listening, bow down
with an unknowable joy

That whitens my yellow years

I grow rich with voices;
the birds of their bliss
flying all around me,
and I forget myself.

(Oh! *This Bloody Game* 1)

Mohanty lived his childhood with his grandmother who brought up him with loving care and tender nourishment. She told him numerous fairy tales that have been imprinted in his mind. It is through these tales of mystery and miracle that Mohanty attains his imaginative spirit, which in maturity gives birth to his poems. So whenever he rakes up his childhood life in his ancestral house he visualizes his grandmother telling him the stories to lull him to sleep and his recollection becomes poetry in the reminiscential mould. Thus the grandmother is not only an inspiration to the poet but also an indispensable character, the central figure of the entire range of his poetry. She makes him a poet and becomes his poetry herself. She builds his being and flows in his being. She is the embodiment of tales that constitute his poetry: This is clearly evident in his poem entitled “Granny”:

It’ not that I’ve forgotten her
nor even the way she stroked
my forehead with her crooked fingers
when I was almost pushed by sleep.

Before the stones become stars
and the dawns melt into darkness
and all the wheels on the rod go silent
she swims in my blood, river of tales.

(*Life Lines* 80)

This grandmother is the constant source of poetry to Mohanty. Whenever he feels desiccated and devoid of life, he looks upon her as his sustenance. The poem entitled “Composition” refers to that attitude:

And my watermelon granny her stories
endless as roots crawling under the earth
swim in my orthodox blood, rigid river

(Oh! *This Bloody Game* 27)

Mohanty is rigid in his journey for the roots and orthodoxly and obstinately looks back to this past. He feels that in modern days of degeneration, regeneration is possible only when we worship our glorious past ideals with unidirectional faith and confidence:

How can I refuse to treasure
The gift of darkness in my heart's
ululant cave? How can I forget
celebration the life that preceded
mine?

(Life Lines32)

Mohanty is a pilgrim to visit his granny in reverence and to inherit her wealth both spiritual and material. This inheritance is the blessing showered upon the posterity by the dead. Here one should refer to his poem "Past":

I know the dead bear no tongues;
they only whisper like the slow rustle
of leaves to warm us

against the white winter.
Their noiseless wanderings
in and around us keep us fit
to live by, year after year
with the passion of a creeper

(Life Lines 52)

He adores and accepts his granny's religion and takes pride in his being her Hindu grandson. Mohanty is ready to follow the Hindu rituals and gestures like wearing Rudrakshya and Tulsi on hands to worship the Hindu gods as the grandmother did herself. He discovers himself through this establishment of the reverential proximity with his granny, her faith, philosophy, religion and culture:

The gods she worshipped with rudraskya and tulsi
on hand are now mine. They silence,
their grim obstinacy are my gold now.
The silver nose-strings and toe-rings she wore
catch dust in the closet. They have become
the crows of my dawning consciousness.

(Oh! This Bloody Game 28)

Mohanty discovers his meaning in his close link with his grandfather too. To him his grandfather is an embodiment of memories which take Mohanty to the world of poetry:

Grandfather,
you're yet another sky
a capreolate sky of memories
whose humble light guides me
and quickens my blood's emerald flow

(Life Lines 14)

He is a teacher, a source of enlightenment and edification of Mohanty. His guidance makes Mohanty glow like a star and Mohanty does not bother about his problems like loneliness, dejection, fear of death etc. Mohanty is grateful to his grandfather for endowing him with meaning :

I don't really bother at all
when the sky of your love hangs on
me and I know that I'm not alone.
What else is one's gratitude?
What else is the rapturous rites of relevance?

(Life Lines 15)

In one of poems, "Composition", the poet discovers what he, as a poet and his poetry, as his creation are made of and expresses his gratitude to his parents and owes his existence to them.

Is' t time now for me to know and measure
the elements of my own composition,
which make me only myself ?

.....
That woman's white blood I suckled, and suckling
I stood an oak. And that man' s colorless sweat
strengthened my limbs to crawl, walk and run

(Oh! This Bloody Game 27)

Mohanty is disgusted with the hypocrisies and corruptions of modern life. He has to face a bitter experience with living in this modern society. He asks his father about the true meaning of life and the way his father lived his life.

What then is this life Dad?
A bundle of sun - flowers waiting for the sun?
The gardener ? An umbrella that fools carry
and leave it somewhere?
A begging bowl without the beggar ?

(Oh! This Bloody Game 40)

In utter dismay Mohanty prays to his father for his instruction to make a refined life that would allow him to live with the romantic fervor of spontaneity and freedom, with diligence and industry. What he begs from his father is a very simple life to suffer the common human lot. He wants to ground his life on the soil of his father's philosophy and culture so that he can successfully identify himself as his true successor:

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 bear the of my alter of my death, a roof to house
a strength to feed the dead
and a head to mingle in the common lot

(Oh! This Bloody Game 40)

Mohanty owes his English to his father. When he was a child he would learn this language with father's help- with his loving care and instruction. This Mohanty repeatedly admits in his poetry and deeply laments his father's absence after his death. A reference can be made to " Father :

When I misplace articles
mispronounce words
a grave voice behind the smoke
sounds: you' re still a child!
When the grave voice melt
under the rapture of wood and life
I am more lonely
Than loneliness-

(Silencing the Words 31)

It is through this poetry that Mohanty tries to keep his link with his parents alive. Mohanty is reared up in the warmth of his mother's lap and he commemorates her loving care and affection in his poetry. He finds his origin in his mother's lap which is still a source of paradisiac amenities. He writes poetry and through it searches for this paradise which he finds in his mother: The poet is strongly certain about it in his poem "Mother"

Warmth
form my mother's lap
Crowns me
with handful of bliss
I don't bother about me

(Silencing The Words 31)

Mohanty's family is not restricted within the boundary of the Mohanty household in Orissa. It is largely comprehensive to the range of his whole nation. Mohanty looks upon his country as a big family to which all the Indians belong as members. So as an Indian, Mohanty owes much to his family for his identity. The patriots, freedom fighters, philosophers, prophets who had once lived in this family have still much to enrich Mohanrty . Though Mohanty is not directly acquainted with them, he owns a living connection with these ancestors and becomes equally responsive and responsible to them. He confesses that he does not know their physical identities. But he feels that mentally he has already identified himself with them. They are the

part and parcel of his being. They are not at all a burden but a priceless possession of bliss to him. The poem entitled “Burden” is highly relevant:

I won't say this gelid weight
of my ancestors, a burden
to disown or dispossess
in such a clairvoyant dawn.
It's true that I don't know
their names, I know not the colour
of their faces. Yet they float
gray with coats of cobwebs and dust
hungrier than ever I could think of
.....
it's, perhaps they who steal away
my worries, my tear's irksome sting.
.....
How can I risk telling their bliss a burden
when all else is drab is drab and sullen ?

(*Life Lines-76*)

Mohanty's knee- deep involvement with his familial ancestry indicates that he is a Post - Colonial poet writing poetry in English. It shows how he reclaims the past through commemoration and celebration. His relationship with his ancestors inspires him to sing the theme song of life that worships the intrinsic values of tradition and culture of the home land.

Works Cited

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