

Niranjan Mohanty- As Critic of Indian English Literature

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Abstract

This paper examines the critical contributions of Niranjan Mohanty to Indian English literary criticism, highlighting his role in shaping a culturally rooted and humanistic discourse. Building upon the early recognition of his potential by Bijay Kumar Das, the study traces Mohanty's evolution as a critic who engaged deeply with major issues of Indian English poetry and literature. His emphasis on the nativization of English, the experience-expression dichotomy, and the significance of cultural memory underscores his commitment to authenticity in creative writing. Mohanty advocates a synthesis of Indian and Western critical frameworks, encouraging the development of indigenous interpretative tools. He also addresses challenges in English studies, including declining standards, lack of critical engagement with emerging writers, and the marginalization of humanities. Ultimately, his criticism foregrounds the "human factor" as essential for achieving universality, thereby establishing his enduring legacy in Indian English literary thought.

Keywords: *Niranjan Mohanty, Indian English Criticism, Nativization of English, Cultural Memory, Humanism in Literature*

Long ago while observing the scene of Indian English Criticism of his time Bijay Kumar Das recognized the critical eyes of Niranjan Mohanty and stated:

Niranjan Mohanty has published a number of research papers on Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayant Mahapatra and O.P. Bhatnagar, besides writing critical anthology on O.P. Bhatnagar. His articles are very informative and highly readable. He bears the promise of a good critic in the years to come. (Das 84)

The prophecy of B.K. Das turned a vital and vivacious reality and the creative and critical genius of Mohanty blossomed evermore in the later years. After the publication of *Considerations* (An Anthology of critical responses to poetry of O.P. Bhatnagar, a poet and critic of repute) a number of research articles published in reputed magazines and journals of India and abroad and he was known and revered not only as a poet of eminence but also as a critic with a wider vision and possibilities among the Indian literary academics. Mohanty has targeted nearly all major issues of Indian English literature of his time in his critical writings

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and besides raising the practical pros and cons of a issues, he has suggested certain valuable pieces of advice to the readers so that they may develop a rational approach and overcome its hurdles. The time Mohanty started criticism, was the time when Indian English literature was to set its roots deeper in the Indian soil and Indian English poetry was gaining ground rapidly. His own comment justifies it:

Indian English poetry has made a stay having had earned critical acclaim from abroad and within India. It has created a confidence among the Indians that creative writing in a second language is not a far-off possibility and that it is in no way inferior to the regional writing.

He adds:

Poets like Jayant Mahapatra and Nissim Ezekiel have already won the central Sahitya Akademi Award for their contribution to Indian literature. Hence Indian poetry in English is no more considered as an outsider no more looked down with contempt. The poet too does not wait for signals from abroad to start the creative process. (Mohanty (ed.) 'Introduction')

Considerations was his first edited Anthology that contains exhaustive scholarly papers by senior scholars like R. K. Singh, B. K. Das, A. N. Dwivedi, P. S. Kasture etc. After the publication of this book, Mohanty wrote a number of critical and thought-provoking articles chiefly dealing with Indian English Literature and Indian English poetry in particular. Mohanty primarily made hectic efforts in strengthening the roots of Indian English poetry and literature and later on torched the path of creative writers writing in English and guided and enlightened the Indian academics who had not got over from the colonial hang-over. His paramount aim was to generate health and unbiased debate on the controversial issues of Indian English writing. The numerous research papers published in different magazines are a living testament to the fact. As he had a “strong conviction that after more than 170 years of its origin, Indian writing in English has achieved its historicity to assume its canonical status today, not simply because it has been incorporated into the syllabi of Indian, European and Western universities, but also because of the critical acclaim and attention it has drawn to its fold.” (Mohanty, *Indian Writing in English: Canonizing the Human Factor* 65)

Mohanty as a perfect historian at first searches the roots of ‘Indian writing in English in general’ and ‘Indian poetry in English in particular’ and finds it strange and miraculous phenomena. He finds it strange because of its cross- cultural fertility and miraculous because of its hitherto undefined authenticity. And then writes with immaculate critical imagination:

When Macaulay decided to teach English to the fettered Indian, he never dreamt that his language would be so dear to them, and that it would be instrumental to the moral defeat of his people maturing under the aegis of colonialism. (Mohanty, *Voices Behind the Wheel: Poets from Orissa Writing in English*)

Mohanty continues to think and mirrors the gradual but genuine development and nativization of English language in India after independence. Macaulay never thought that Indians would use his language so creatively as to nativize it. Britishers left with us a Royal English and we have eventually democratized it with care and possessiveness. As long as they monitored our soil with grim malice and red eyes, their language shaped us; and when they left, we started shaping their language and their language became ours. Synchronization of the Nativization of English Language is one of the rarest gifts the post- Independence India has ever witnessed to. (Mohanty, *Voices Behind the Wheel: Poets from Orissa Writing in English*)

Being a practicing poet, Mohanty observed and experienced the hurdles of a creative author while writing in foreign language. He feels in terms of Indian poet writing in English very closely and states after a deep analysis.

When an Indian poet chooses English as his creative medium, he has, inevitably, to come to terms with certain problems- --- First of all his diffidence to master over the experience-expression dichotomy, that emerges partly from the degree of authenticity of experience and expression, and partly from the mother-tongue in the creative process.

Mohanty gives reasons for such problem of experience- expression dichotomy and adds further:

The dominance of mother-tongue in the creative process makes the expression diluted, and the experience sham, although sometimes unique. And secondly, “the quality of the idiom he uses.” And thirdly, rather more vitality, is the full of consciousness writing in a second language. (Mohanty, *Voices Behind the Wheel: Poets from Orissa Writing in English*)

Although, these problems can never be solved; according to Mohanty, what is important and interesting is ‘that when a poet writes with such problems in mind, he is likely to discover a new mode of expression quite amenable to his sensibility.’ Mohanty also knows the expectations of the Western writers with the Eastern creative authors, ‘and their ability to relate themselves to the history and to interrogate it or to subvert it’ as ‘these were the devices of the Western society, for these were the products of Western academic scholarships’. Again at

another place, Mohanty regards cultural memory and milieu as an important factor in the growth of a creative artist. He observes:

It is truism that without an impassioned adherence- celebrity or subversive or ironical- to the cultural memory, a creative writer cannot grow, cannot enshrine a vision, cannot persuasively authenticate one's creative medium or idiom, cannot measure the immensity of one's own being and becoming. Such an adherence is a creative writer's inner need, an unalloyed compulsion to know the self. (Mohanty, Cultural Memory and Globalisation: Indian Poetry in English Today 7)

Mohanty looks at the poetry of luminary poets like A.K. Ramanujan, Kamala Das and Jayant Mahapatra and finds ample traces of cultural traces in their poetry. Mohanty smells it a consciousness of two forms the inner and outer and the inner which constitute the self in Ramanujan's poetry, a celebration of the essence of Orissan sensibility shaped by and nurtured by a "reckless innocence" (185), and a sensibility so exquisitely tethered to the belief that 'things happen in consequence of things that have happened before, and that nothing can change the entire sequence of thing' (186) in the poetry of Jayant Mahapatra, and in the 'search' for 'tenderness' 'freedom' unselfish equality and love and in the discovery of it in the memory of her grandmother and in the personality of the immortal flute- player Krishna in the poetry of Kamla Das.

His own canon of poetry was also not a laboured exercise or jugglery of words and emotions; rather it was realistic and effective. The fact gets further affirmation when we look at his followings comments:

I do-not know why I have been disposed towards believing that poetry-whether writing it reading it-brings one closer to life, closer to whatever constitutes life and whatever makes life meaningful.

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Writing poems, I have passionately believed that unless the words are dipped in the river of love, they refuse to be famed refuse to resonate with new meanings they refuse to boil like rice in an earthen pot put on the hearth. It is because of their fulfilling dance and that the poem begins to assume it's being; it begins to breathe and whisper. (Mohanty, A House of Rains)

Mohanty personally believe, poetry has a force that connects two hearts as well as souls, and it has sublimity that ennoble and enhances man's thought power and develops a vision of illumination. It is significant to quote his words:

Yet I believed that ennobles me to connect; ennobles and enkindles me to relate myself to a flux that is inescapable, to a centre of faith that is interminable. (Mohanty, A House of Rains)

At another place, he considers poetry as an alternate of Religion even:

I can simply say that as long as words are dipped in the river of love, poetry will become prayer, and poetry will take the place of religion to rejuvenate our minds so that we endear life and celebrate its diverse dimensions. (Mohanty, A House of Rains)

He admits the role of time and place in the development of the vision and consciousness of the poets. To him conscious vision of a poet adds to the perfection of poetry. Daily experiences and realities constitute the entire vision by way of making him aware of eccentricities around him/her. He remarks:

It is out of a definite consciousness of the poet about the place and time; he lives in that poetry acquires a kind of intensity and depth. More conscious the poet, better his poetry because this consciousness results from a kinship with life and its problems. Once poetry reaches this intensity and depth, it acquires a definite form or pattern which orchestrates vision. (Mohanty, O.P. Bhatnagar's poetry : The meaningful Glance)

Mohanty sets high hopes with Indian English poetry and he acknowledges its 'worth' and 'merits', especially the post-independence Indian English poetry has been the primary concern of his study. His observation of the scenario of Indian poetry in English is marked with positivism, Indianess and supportiveness:

I believe, the phase of imitation is over, for our creative writers in English have already achieved their idiom and voices which are authentic, genuine and human to the core-particularly from Nissim Ezekiel, A. K. Ramanujan, Jayant Mahapatra, Kamla Das, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, R. Parthasarthy to Bibhu Padhi, Niranjana Mohanty, Makrand Paranjape, Rukmini Bhaya Nagar, Raju Samal, Rabindra Kumar Swain, Prabharanjan K. Mishra and Robi S. Ngargom and many others.

And he proves his point by enumerating some examples:

When Ezekiel writes his poem 'A Night of the Scorpion', or Ramanujan his 'Small-Scale Reflections of a Great House' or Jayant Mahapatra, his Relationship and many other poems depicting the poet's own ties with the cultural, historical coordinates of Orissa, or when Mehrotra so eminently presents Ganga, or when Bibhu Padhi writes about Cuttack or Buddha or when Niranjana Mohanty portrays his village experiences around the centre of Home or family- what are their models that they imitate. None but themselves- exclusively themselves. (Niranjana)

Mohanty feels the unity in diversity also. He finds no point of distinction in Regional and National literature. He finds both the literatures as the complementary to each other.

But one thing must be made clear that despite very sensitive and aesthetically rewarding poems being written from multiple regional locations, such poems subsume Indian identity. There is no clash between the regional locale and National ethos. It is true that the regional moorings support and shape the sensibility, the idiom and the vision of creative writer, yet such moorings transcend the regional boundaries to celebrate what remains seminally Indian. (Foreword 1, A Discovery)

And yet he maintains that ‘Indian English fiction in English has taken the front seat, both for its own sake and for the kind of critical responses it has evoked over the years. He regards poetry ‘next to fiction’ and gives the ‘last’ place to drama. He holds that ‘it has been maintained by scholars and critics that there is no dearth of poetry but quality poetry is rare.’ But he does not mean to say that ‘Fiction represents the country or its culture more than what either poetry or drama does.’ His approach to literature is qualitative and not quantitative.

Literature is always self-validating. The validity of any literary genere stems from its quality- both the quality of perception and of representation. Literature, whatever its genere, must provide us with new angles to read understand, know and interpret reality.

And he strictly says:

It must evoke fresh perspectives to overcome the condition of stagnation and decadence. It must remain human and humane to the core it has to assume a timeless or a universal condition. (Mohanty, Indian Writing in English: Canonizing the Human Factor)

He strongly advocates humanism in literature and deems it an indispensable factor in the attainment of universality. He regards:

If Indian Writing in English has to leave an indelible impression if it has to retain an everlasting quality, or it has to reach the condition of fire, it has to embody the human factor, the human element with honesty, sincerely and or religion temper. This is how our writes can retain their identity without failing to achieve universality. (Ibid)

Mohanty advocates Translations and Sanskrit poetics in his postulations. He even motivates Indian writers ‘to draw sustenance from the rich literary traditions of regional writings which are so diverse, so authentic, so persuasive and so human’. For retaining its identity ‘English studies in India must have to bank on translation, - translation of the regional writings into English’. He regards ‘The *Rasa*’ and *dhvani* theory of Sanskrit as ‘a suitable alternative today,

had our access to the original Sanskrit texts been a reality'. But he doubts the applicability of it and warns us of 'this practical handicap', and observes significantly:

The number of English teachers who have expertise in reading critically examining the Sanskrit text using tools of Sanskrit Poetics is strikingly limited. With a mere theoretical knowledge of Sanskrit poetics, I am afraid, it would be unwholesome to critically the English texts.

And he laments the present predicament of English studies in India and suggests:

With a deep sadness at heart, both as a teacher of English and a creative writer in English, I begin to realize that the standard of English is fast deteriorating. Whether by changing the syllabi, both at the school level and college or by imparting new methods of teaching English, English studies must aim at improving the standard of English.

He also shows ample concern over another issue of lack of interest in humanities. He says:

There is an increasing lack of passion for studying literature in general, stemming from more pragmatic and realistic problem of unemployment.

Mohanty is also sullen to look at the 'dismal feature of English studying in India' in 'its indifference to the new, upcoming, emerging writers and poets today'. He points out:

Ruefully, but with all humility, I am to inform that this difference has a cumulative effect on the publishing houses. I draw your attention to the Indian poetry in English scene. Critics remain silent over the new generation of poets (even if they are not really new, for many of them have been writing poetry in English for almost three decades, with publication in journals regularly), over their writings. (Mohanty, English Studies in India: Challenges in Future Directions)

Mohanty does not question the quality of these poets of new generation and over-swaps them with their contemporaries of Europe and U. S. A. He raises a very significant question:

How can an authentic literary tradition mature when critics and academicians and publishers remain indifferent to this new body of writing, which steadily grows to size, despite a deadening coldness? (Mohanty, English Studies in India: Challenges in Future Directions)

But the approach of Niranjana Mohanty is ever developing, innovative and is bright not dark. He, with a vision of sanguine hope and vivacity suggests:

The critics in India can think of formulating new, innovative interpretative tools to critically evaluate the texts. It is time that we framed our own methods of critical evaluation. In a multi-lingual and multi-cultural situation like ours, and in a world of change and information, merely exclusively would impose limitations. (Ibid 8)

And he asks the contemporary creative authors and critics to become more viable, receptive, impartial and liberal in assimilating the best things of world literature. So he writes:

We live in such a world through such a century that we cannot afford to remain contented and complacent with an exclusive system of English studies in India. (Ibid)

And he considers the problem of assimilation or ‘when to open shatters and when to shut’ as the most important challenge for English studies in India. Mohanty quoting ‘John A- Karkala’s persuasive suggestions’ enforces the Indian English authors ‘to read Indian classics in Translation, first to become aware of the literary rites in the intricate culture experience in the same manner as the modern European writers, critics and academics would reach out to their rites in the European cumulative literary tradition’ and thinks re-expression from the literary roots as unavoidable and imperative.

To conclude, Mohanty’s criticism of Indian English literature is steeped in Indian tradition and culture which is synonymous with vitality, positivism rationalism and has more than a two thousand year old historical background. Mohanty’s critical tools based on Indian and Western critical theories will definitely afford to build a unique blend of cultural and literary traditions and his peculiar contribution to Indian English literary criticism will immortalize him and will rank him with critics like V. K. Chari, K. S Iyengar, C.D. Narsimaiah, O.P. Bhatnagar, V. K. Gokak, Krishna Rayon, P. H. Shashtri, C. Narayan Menon, S. C. Gupta, Rajnath who emphasized the need to learn from Indian traditions for literary and critical studies. In this way, he is no less important to the luminary critics like Homi Bhabha, Aijaz Ahmad or Gayatri Spivak. Now Niranjana Mohanty, the poet critic is not among us yet, he has left a rich tradition of criticism behind him. His poems justify the fact that has attained universality and timelessness:

The day I shall die, for surely

I must have to, don’t think

I shall go silent and shadowless.

The limits I set to my body

Only go limitless, like the shade

Of an old banyan tree in darkness.

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