

Gopinath Mohanty, India and the World

If the mark of a writer's genius is his ability to anticipate some of the significant literary developments, then the Odia novelist Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1992) possessed this streak in good and full measure. The conception of the God-like Velutha in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* can be said to be outlined in a novel that Mohanty penned more than three decades ago. That novel is *Laya Bilaya*. Mohanty writes here about a young *nulia*, the born tackler of the sea and sands. Describing his body as "a temple tower reversed", he tells us how "this body had not been made to flourish in isolation from the world he lived in." Mohanty is, in fact, one up on Roy by envisioning the labouring body as communal and social and not merely as the body of pleasure and desire.

Oriya readers have revelled for years in Mohanty's diverse output, wide ranging style and his engaged attitude to the world. It is time they also noticed his flair for sounding us out on themes before their time. Much before Chinua Achebe's classic tale of colonial conquest of the African Igbo lands by the whites in *Things Fall Apart*, Mohanty gave us his hauntingly beautiful epic saga of the disintegration of the Paraja tribe's communal way of life. The eponymous novel laid bare the individualistic and mercenary forces to which a new nation was giving birth. It warned us of the enemy within. Mohanty's *Danapani* (translated into English as *The Survivor*) also preceded Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* in portraying the condition of unease in a colonial world.

Modernism as a literary tendency fascinated Mohanty. He had absorbed his lessons from Pound, Eliot, Yeats and Joyce well. With his emergence as a creative writer in Odia he found a way of engaging with the modernist themes and styles with a view to their local cultural adaptation. Thus was born his guarded and qualified response to Western modernism. Not many people are aware that *Laya Bilaya* takes its place along side such Indian-language novels as Dhurjati Prasad's *Antashila* and Mahasweta Devi's *Biscoper Baksa* as one such response to Joyce's novel *A Portrait*. The nature of Mohanty's revision of Joyce's artist novel is to be found in his blending of the two non-believing and alienated figures of Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom (of *Ulysses*) into a single composite believer figure, Tarun Roy, whose name spells youth and renewal.

Gopinath Mohanty achieved this time-transcending feat despite setting his fictions in villages, small towns and the tribal hinterland of Orissa. His "fictionscape" is an eloquent testimony to the Gandhian credo of living locally and communicating globally.

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