

Survival, Sexuality, Modernity, and City: Urban Narration in Gopinath Mohanty's *The Survivor*.

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Abstract

The city is a product of colonial modernity. The colonial administration favored the introduction of roads, railways, marketplaces, and educational institutions, not to mention structures of governance like police, law courts, and prisons, which caused the traditional, agrarian Indian society to urbanize and modernize. In keeping with the urban and modern forms, relationships among humans underwent a substantial change. The community consciousness gave rise to the subjective, individual consciousness. Personal relationships became increasingly subject to and defined by the laws of property and possession.

Thus this paper attempts to explore the prominent features of the urban landscape and consciousness as mediated by the Odia novel. The novel chosen for this purpose is Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Danapani* (1955), translated into English by Bikram K Das as *The Survivor* (1995) to illustrate the equation between city-bred features such as money, sexuality, commodity, and the emerging orientations in the subjective sphere such as hedonism, commodification, acquisitiveness and hard-boiled-dom as manifested in plot dynamics, characterization and other narrative aspects.

Mohanty has aptly created a character like Balidatta to suit the urban landscape. His life is mediated through the process of urbanization. He is young and ambitious but not much capable, clever, efficient, and dynamic. He has the indomitable urge of a typical urbanite to

climb the ladder of success at the cost of his dignity. His relationship with his wife, Sarojini, is composed of intimacy and indifference. For Balidatta, power and sex run parallel. The paper examines the various contours of their relationship, submerged by the craze of potential and authority in Balidatta and Sarojini's slow step toward promiscuity.

Keywords: Modernity, Sexuality, Acquisitive Individual, Commodity, City

Gopinath Mohanty, Orissa's first Jnanpith award winner, was one of the tallest figures of post-Independence stories. Though his better-known novels are about the needy and the marginalized, especially tribes, his representation of the middle-class community in Orissa's small towns is authentic. Suppose *Paraja* and *Amrutara Santana* is his major novels on the tribal theme. In that case, *Mati Metal*, which received the Bharatiya Jnanpith Award, is a classic of the Indian village; *Danapani* is an engrossing portrayal of the desires and frustrations, the dreams and aspirations of middle-class men in Odisha. The original title means a morsel of food and water. However, it implicates a fig for existence or assertion, *dana* and *pani* describing the means for survival. However, the protagonist Balidatta does not need a mere survivor to satiate his bodily need. He wants something new and more, to be at the

pinnacle of hierarchy, to assert middle-class hegemony over others through controlling the discourse. He desires to look down upon the colleagues with whom he works.

He belongs to the middle-class group, which, according to SumitSarkar, is the new English-educated group that started emerging as a distinct section of Indian society during the 19th century. Though this middle class styled itself after the Western bourgeois, it was almost entirely dissociated from the entrepreneurial business activities that typically formed the material basis of the West. Instead, they were primarily engaged in government employment or a profession like law, education, journalism, and medicine, for which their English education mainly made them well suited.

To establish his dominance, Balidatta needed agencies like schools, colleges, publishing industries, learned societies, scientific laboratories, and so forth, which he was deprived of. He is a young, ambitious officer. However, he is not capable, dynamic, energetic, or brilliant enough to make it to the top. Still, he has an indomitable wish to crawl upwards anyhow. He does all the odd jobs to impress the higher authority to reach the pinnacle of success so that he can control the company where he works as a lower cadre employee. He procures enough pig manure for the Bada Sahib's garden, something he has come forward to supply after overhearing Memsahib's conversation with her gardener. "A few handfuls of pig manure would make these roses bloom, mali, pig manure for the roses, horse dung for the cannas, and lots of water!" (The Survivor, 1) His colleagues have their litanies of joys, sorrows, and anger, all pleasing the superior gods and propitiating them for potential. , Apart from money making, he desires to be the company's boss. In Balidatta post independent Odisha sees a new kind of middle

class who tries to control the hegemony beyond their mercantile ambitions.

Balidatta and his wife Sarojini are middle-class people. Their world is the grey, colorless world of the small town, petty, full of rumors, yet overwhelmingly intimate and friendly. The caste system of middle-class ethics determines relationships. Their wives can only talk over those inanities of drawing-room culture common to middle-class ethics. They are static and nonchangeable. However, Sarojini is different from other middle-class women. She is modern. For her, modern refers to a point in time. It represents whatever is current and present. The present time is not the past or the time yet to come. However, modernity is not just a point in time; it is a particular way through which time is experienced. This concept represented by the term modern comes out beautifully in the seminal work of American Marxist literary scholar Marcel Berman in the book *all that is Solid Melts into Air*. He says;

To be modern is to discover ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, growth, and transformation of ourselves and the world- and, at the same time, which threatens to demolish everything we have and are. Modern environments cut across all boundaries of geography, class, nationality, of religion; modernity can be said to connect all humanity. However, it is a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration, struggle, contradiction, ambiguity, and anguish. To be modern is to be a part of the universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air." (Berman 15)

Modern is a kind of worldly experience in a particular time. It uses paths for future possibilities by disturbing the known world of the past, a continuous and ever-evolving phenomenon. Moreover, such kind of

experience melts all the solid institutions like law, religion, and orthodoxy, paving the path for a brand new world. This experience has been known to all generations. Every generation sees itself as modern because it feels to be cut off from past traditions for the uncertain future. Although we agree that such a kind of experience, the modern, is universal or eternal, we need to concede that there is a difference in degree. Modernity cannot be experienced equally in all ages of history. In the maelstrom, she shades all the traditional virtues. Being trained by Jhilli and Mili, sisters of Ranjitbabu, she wears fashionable dresses, attends parties, and becomes a member of many guilds in the city. She delivers speeches about the social mobility of women. She plays tennis and moves with people different from her husband. She thinks this is modernity and his husband is the harbinger.

Modernity for Sarojini is inevitable. It has a tremendous force that will sway everyone away. One cannot look backward. One has to live with it. Walter Benjamin has rightly pointed out the compulsion of progress while interpreting Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, the metaphor of modernism:

"His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before us, he sees a catastrophe, which keeps wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at its feet. The angel would like to stay back, awaken the dead, and make entire that has been smashed.

However, a storm is blowing from heaven and has caught in his wings; it is so powerful that the angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future; his back has turned, while the pile of debris before him grows toward the sky. What we call progress is this storm." (Benjamin 392)

If in Paraja and Amrutara Santana, Gopinath created characters like SukruJani and Sarabu Santa, large-hearted men humiliated by the cruel social order, Balidatta, an equally powerful portrayal, is a man, aware of his inadequacy and psychological inhibitions. He looks at sexuality through a different lens. It can be a stepping stone for someone's career leap. His relationship with his wife is composed of elements of intimacy and indifference. Like a child, Sarojini often has to look after, comfort, and almost put him to sleep. She is caring, tries to stand by him in difficulties, and comforts him when he feels broken, and yet, often, both look beyond this relationship for pleasure in some wild fantasies of riches and forbidden pleasures. Sarojini is the primary caregiver at one end, and at the other, she shares in their moral degeneration. As for Balidatta, power and sex look alike and run parallel. Their enjoyment seems identical. The novel portrays their relationship beautifully, as their adoration for each other is submerged by the craze for power and authority in Balidatta, leading Sarojini toward the road to promiscuity.

As time passes, Balidatta moves up in the office, making himself and his wife more susceptible to pressures. He wears a weak personality at different points, changing slowly and unnoticeably into a man without personality. As time passes, they look brighter, and they become more affluent. However, their conscience hunts them. Balidatta is not the innocent man gradually corrupted by a bureaucratic, hierarchical, and competitive society. He moves through twists and turns to aggrandize power and property. The plot would not have been moving if it were only the tale of the protagonist's transformation in his quest for ability. The novel is much more. The novel deals with various contours of the unusual relationship

between Balidatta and Sarojini, Sharma and Ranjit, EnkatRao, and many others in the world of a city without moral value.

Even as Balidatta rises, he is never happy. He almost equated power with sex and social influence with wealth. The body of Sarojini has been commodified and had been neatly parcelled out between Sharma and RanjitBabu. He makes the sacrifice to rise. However, something is lacking in his material pursuit. In the end, his dreams and vision of urban life are shattered as the tired Balidatta returning home only hears that Sarojini has gone out:

"Harsha, where is Ma? He asked, referring to Sarojini.

"She has gone out," Harsha said. "That babu, the babu who used to come in a motor car, in the other place, had come. He and ma had tea together. Then Ma and he went out together.

The babu will come back. He will stay the night here." (The Survivor, 222)

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