

Fakir Mohan Senapati's Six Acres and a Third: a Thematic Analysis

*Swati Suri

*Assistant Professor, Dev Samaj College for Women, Ferozepur, Punjab, India.
Corresponding Author: Swati Suri*

Abstract: All the literary works are being re-viewed from newer perspectives and literary genres are being redefined, with the death of the author and birth of the reader. The emphasis of a reader has shifted from aesthetic experience to epistemological enrichment. For instance, the Mahabharata has been retold from the perspective of the displaced Nagas who lost their lands to Pandavas, in the award winning Gujrati novel 'Kuruksheetra' by Manubhai Pancholi Darshak. Fakir Mohan Senapati's Six Acres and a Third is a work of fiction that too can be looked at from various perspectives, but has a number of themes embroidered in it which always stands out and make it valuable and worth reading. Senapati has brought into light various problems faced during the colonial times. Some of the major themes will be discussed in the paper that follows.

Keywords: colonial, morality, exploitation, land, dehumanization.

Date of Submission: 22-08-2017

Date of acceptance: 08-09-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) father of Odia novel and short stories is also the first Indian novelist to use vernacular language and rustic characters and dialogues in the fiction. His fiction **Chha Mana Anthaguntha (Six Acres and Half)**, written forty years before Premchand's **Godan** was a masterpiece on many accounts. For depiction of a vivid and pathetic picture of rural poors' oppressed by the Zamindars and upper class people **Chha Mana Anthaguntha** should be taken as a specimen of first progressive novel. His contribution to Odia language and its revival is immense. He has translated the Mahabharata, the Geeta, the Ramayana and Boudhavatar Kavya into simple Odia Verse. He has outstanding contribution to the Odia literature as he saved the Oriya language and literature from its possible downfall and constantly worked for its survival and development. Dr. Mayadhar Mansingh calls him Thomas Hardy of Odisha. People call him the forerunner of Premchand and the first Indian author to deal with social realism through rustics and pastoral theme. Fakir Mohan has contributed only four novels and twenty five stories which endowed him the title of Katha Samrat (Emperor of Fiction) of the literature. He is a great genius, a versatile personality and an ardent literary artist in true sense of the term. This great son of our soil breathed his last on June 14, 1918 at Balasore before Odisha had become a separate province.

Six Acres and a Third is the first Indian novel to deal with the exploitations of landless peasants by the feudal Lord. It was written much before the October revolution of Russia or much before the emerging of Marxist ideas in India. **In the words of Satya P.Mohanti, "Fakir Mohan Senapati's classic Oriya novel is a marvel of 19th century literary realism, complex and sophisticated. It seeks to analyse and explain social reality instead of merely holding up a mirror to it. The novel's literary innovations changed Oriya literature forever".**

II. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The novel is set in colonial India describing an Indian society during the early decades of the 19th century, telling a tale of property, wealth, greed and theft. 19th century India was a saga of colonial contact which historically changed the face of rural society and enacted the capitalist drama of unequal power equations. Exploitation became the norm. According to Loomba,

"Colonialism can be defined as the conquest and control of other people's lands and goods".

Six Acres narrates realistically the socio-cultural state of odisha in the 19th century, where the Odia population was about to lose its linguistic and cultural independence through historical contact with both the British and the Bengali. The Zamindar, Mangaraj, in Six Acres is shown to be the prototype of the exploitative colonizer who propagates his ideal and creates many more such agents, one being Champa, a maid originally and then Mangaraj's mistress and ally in crime. The story of Mangaraj and his evil actions is presented to us

through the vision of a self-reflexive, postmodern narrator- a narrative technique used by Shashi Tharoor in 'The Great Indian Novel' and Salman Rushdie in 'Midnight's Children'. The novel presents the tragic encounter between the traditional way of life and the forces of colonial modernity. Ramachandra Mangaraj discarded all the ethical norms that the traditional Oriya society accepts as eternal verities. Freed from the shackles of traditional morality, he sets about appropriating the wealth of others through all means, fair and foul. Having no respect for familial bonds, he turns his house into a brothel presided over by his chief partner in sin and crime, Champa. Mangaraj manipulates the loopholes in the colonial legal system quite easily and establishes himself within a new feudal order where wealth and proximity to the rules were the only qualification for prominence. Mangaraj pays for his unnatural ambition and upward mobility through his dehumanization and alienation from the community. The signs of his dehumanization can be seen in the ruination of his family and the way he has turned his house into a virtual brothel:

"Like birds of different feathers seeking shelter in a large tree, [women] had flocked to Mangaraj's house. They kept arriving and leaving; it was impossible to keep track of their movements".

Ramachandra Mangaraj is introduced to the readers, "as a zamindar-a rural landlord and a prominent moneylender as well, though his transactions in grain far exceeded those in cash". Mangaraj's cousin Shyam was forced to sell his land to Mangaraj for he had to raise money to feed the Brahmins, as an act of expiation for having eaten onion. The narrator makes the reader draw inferences from his comments:

"Iniquities cannot be hidden for very long and the incident soon became known to Mangaraj. Had he not come to his cousin's rescue, Shyam's face would even now be covered with ugly stubble, a mask of penance. Out of sheer generosity Mangaraj made sure the ritual of expiation involved very little expense- a mere fifteen acres of Shyam's rent free ancestral property".

Senapati raises the question of ownership of land. None of the men is genuinely the owner of the land they possess. Originally land holding were rewards for service done and they were rent-free. Over the years they were misappropriated by unscrupulous people like Mangaraj. There is a close connection between land a person holds and the power he wields because of his land holdings. The narrator records, with tongue in cheek, "the market in Govindapur owed its existence and prosperity to him. Without his orchard's bounty...the market would have presented much sorer sight".

The narrator maintains, **"Our Mangaraj was never one to discriminate between his own property and that of others. According to the Shastras, only the small minded make a distinction between mine and thine"**. It is for this reason that when he falls short of seedling while planting his fields, he asks his head farm hand to strip the plot of Shyam Gochhaita.

Mangaraj's treatment of his farm hands presents before the readers the injustice and tyranny of owners for their workers. He served them two large bowls of watery liquid before serving rice, "and if a farm hand over resented having to drink so much gruel before the meal, Mangaraj would deliver a long lecture on its beneficial effects and health giving properties". He would serve them the leaves and flowers from the drumstick trees. They were reserved exclusively for the nourishment and well being of farm hands and only drumsticks went straight to the market for sale. No one else was allowed to put his vegetables up for sale until the produce from the zamindar's orchard had all been sold. Senapati's critique of society includes his satire on the English-educated Indians who willfully alienate themselves from their culture by aping their colonial masters. He lashes out at the middle and upper class Oriya readers too.

"Ask a new babu his grandfather's father's name, he will hem and haw, but the names of the ancestors of England's Charles the Third will readily roll off his tongue. To be considered a scholar, it is necessary to have read about the English or the French; there is no point in learning about oneself or one's neighbor".

The discourse on language in the chapter titled 'Zamindar Sheikh Dildar Mian' provides one example:

"In the past, the Persian language has been held in high favour; it was the language of the court. With a sharp and a pitiless plan, God has inscribed a strange fate for India: yesterday the language of the court was Persian, today it is English. Only he knows which language will follow tomorrow..... English pundits say, 'Sanskrit is a dead language'. We should go even further, 'Sanskrit is a language of the half-dead'".

There are also unequivocal statements about other social evils such as the caste system, oppression of linguistic minorities, subjugation of women and exploitation of the poor. Here is his comment against the unjust legal system, "Under this system, the clever and the rich get off, even though, in truth they are guilty of hundreds of crimes. While the simple and the poor get into trouble and are harassed for their innocence in the law courts". Senapati in a very sharp ironic way comments on the so-called highest class and caste of the society. He does not say anything but at the same time says it all: "The Brahmins were fighting like dogs over a handful of rice...It is absolutely incorrect to compare them to dogs...Brahmins fight over rice offered to departed soul, whereas dogs fight over rice left over by the living..." Spurred on by the success of his rapacious pursuit of property, he sets his eye on a fertile chunk of land measuring six acres and a third and owned by a lower-caste weaver couple, Bhagia and Saria. Armed with the knowledge of the colonial laws and taking advantage of the couple's simplicity, blind adherence to religious rituals, and pious sentimentality, he used Champa's deceitfulness to cheat Bhagia and Saria out of their six acres and a third as well as a cow the

childless couple had nursed like a child. Driven to destitution, Saria dies, and Bhagia goes mad. Shaantani, wife of Mangaraj, after failing to protect the couple is heartbroken and dies too. After Shaantani's death the novel is quickly reduced to a chaotic end. In the quirk of fate Mangaraj is arrested for murdering Saria, but is punished by the court, not for the innumerable sins he has committed against mankind, but ironically for unlawfully taking away the cow from the weaver couple. Champa runs away with all the valuables of Mangaraj in the company of a barber, who kills her in a dispute about sharing the loot and then is himself devoured by a crocodile while crossing a river. Mangaraj is cheated out of all his remaining wealth by his lawyer, Ramram Lala. Like other works of Senapati this novel also has a simple moral tale on the surface, which can be paraphrased as: if you do not abide by the ethical conduct or dharma the traditional wisdom has taught you, you will be destroyed. In Saria and Bhagia, the weaver couple in this novel, we see an example of the extreme form of dehumanization brought about by the extreme poverty. It is not only the lives of this couple that are affected, Six Acres and a Third as a whole is a picture of chaos all around where Brahmin widows like Marua resort to prostitution, unscrupulous women like Champa rise to power. Six Acres and a Third delineates a vast landscape of waste and death where both the oppressor and the oppressed succumb in their own contradictions. Alienated from his pious wife and from his derelict children, Mangaraj's life is centred around cash and property. It is symptomatic that even though Fakirmohan begins the novel as 'Mangaraja Carita', in the manner of Caritas belonging to the tradition of epics and puranas, he entitles the work **Six Acres and a Third**. It is as if a certain obsession for property has turned a human being into a thing, his search for commodities leading to his own commoditisation.

III. CONCLUSION

Mangaraj's downfall at the end of the novel is a grim reminder of the possible consequences not only of the instruments of colonisation, of which Mangaraj obviously was one, but of the entire project of colonisation. Toward the end of Mangaraj's story, he is punished by the law and we hear how the "Judge Sahib" ordered that his landed estate, his "zamindari," be taken away. It is sold to a lawyer, who as rumour in the village has it "will come with ten palanquins followed by five horses and two hundred foot-soldiers" to take possession of Mangaraj's large estate. The ordinary villagers react to this news by reminding one another of an old saying: "O horse, what difference does it make to you if you are stolen by a thief? You do not get much to eat here; you will not get much to eat there. No matter who becomes the next master, we will remain his slaves. We must look after our own interests". This makes it clear that Mangaraj's end was followed by the birth of a new Mangaraj, for the villagers everything remained the same. In his magisterial *History of Indian Literature, 1800-1910*, Sisir Kumar Das calls Senapati's novel the "culmination of the tradition of realism" in modern Indian literature, referring to its implicit links with earlier instances of realism in fiction and drama: **"All these plays and novels contain elements of realism in varying degrees, but none can match Fakir Mohan's novel in respect of its minute details of social life and economic undercurrents regulating human relationships and the variety of characters representing traditional occupational groups"**

Senapati takes us back to 1830's showing the loopholes of the British Empire through his work of realism. He skilfully balances the two realities of Western Empire, exploitation and enlightenment. The downtrodden, illiterate people now became 'babus' because they have mastered knowledge from their colonial masters. In *Six Acres and a Third* Senapati unveils the hidden realities and he voices for the marginalized. Senapati's every move in the novel is a critique of the British colonial rule. Through this novel, Senapati gives voice to the voiceless peasants. He condemns both the English outsider and the indigenous people - the comprador class and the Brahmins. Senapati's work points to the need for economic and social reform and powerfully pleads for the empowerment of the underprivileged.

REFERENCES

- [1] Mohanty, Satya P. "Introduction." *Six Acres and a Third*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005. Print.
- [2] Senapati, Fakir Mohan. *Six Acres and a Third*. Trans. Rabi Shankar Mishra, Satya P. Mohanty, Jatindra K. Nayak and Paul St-Pierre. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2005. Print. <http://www.fmuniversity.nic.in/pdf/5.%20About%20Fakir%20Mohan%20Senapati.pdf>
- [3] "The History of Orissa: An Introduction." *South Asian History*. Web. 25 June 2001. < http://india_resource.tripod.com >.

IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Swati Suri. "Fakir Mohan Senapati's Six Acres and a Third: a Thematic Analysis." *IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, vol. 22, no. 9, 2017, pp. 67-69.