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The Poignant Portrayal of Famine in Manoj Kumar Das's *The Famine*

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Abstract:

Famine is not merely an economic or environmental calamity but also a profound human crisis that exposes despair, inequality, and resilience. Kanhu Charan Mohanty's Odia novel *Haa Anna, Haa Anna* (1935), was translated by Manoj Kumar Das as *The Famine* (2022). The novel depicts the devastating Odisha famine through the intertwined journeys of ordinary villagers. This article critically examines Mohanty's portrayal of famine as both a material disaster and a moral test of humanity. By foregrounding hunger, displacement, and the corrosion of values, the novel documents famine as a lived historical reality and a universal human experience.

Keywords: Famine, hunger, displacement, inequality, natural disaster.

Introduction

The literary representation of famine has remained a marginal yet powerful theme in Indian writing. Kanhu Charan Mohanty, a prolific twentieth-century Odia novelist, who confronts the devastating effects of famine in his landmark work *Haa Anna, Haa Anna*. It was translated into English by Manoj Kumar Das as *The Famine*. The novel draws from Mohanty's firsthand experiences and the historical famine of 1866 in Odisha.

In this narrative, famine is not presented merely as scarcity but as a disruptive force that reshapes communities, identities, and moral values. This paper investigates how Mohanty's text portrays despair, hunger, and survival, situating famine as both a historical tragedy and a metaphor for social inequality.

Historical and Literary Context

Mohanty's writings reflect the turbulence of twentieth-century India, marked by colonial exploitation, recurring food scarcities, and social upheaval. *The Famine* resonates with the historical memory of Odisha, where the 1866 famine caused mass deaths and migrations (Mohanty, 2021). Behera (2007) observes that Mohanty's novels capture the transition between rural stagnation and social mobility, with famine acting as a recurring motif.

Through his translation, Manoj Kumar Das renders this Odia classic accessible to global readership, ensuring that regional experiences of hunger enter wider literary and scholarly conversations. In his Preface the novelist Kanhu Charan Mohanty mentions that the novel was written based on the first-hand experiences of severe famine which occurred during 1915-1916 in one of the princely states. The novel has the background of Orissa famine of 1866.

Literature has a unique ability to capture the depths of human despair, painting a poignant picture of the emotional turmoil that accompanies the experience of famine. Writers often use powerful imagery and evocative language to convey the sense of hopelessness and helplessness that pervades communities ravaged by hunger. Through the written word, readers are able to empathize with the characters who grapple with despair in the face of starvation and hardship. This sense of despair, ravages of hunger is depicted in the novel *The Famine*.

Famine and starvation are of the universal themes that are rarely depicted in literature. The novel *famine* not only depicts famine and starvation. It further depicts the impact of famine on living beings. Famine not only brings disaster. But it is so powerful to creep in every nook and

corner of the world irrespective of the social position, caste, gender, religion. This is reflected throughout the entire novel.

Famine and Human Despair

The novel is set in the village of Naripur. The novel opens with incident where Jagu saves Uma from drowning in the pond during the festivity day of Khundurukuni. Therefore, boys and girls of the village have gathered in the pond to pluck lilies to worship Khundurukuni. Uma while attempting to pluck the flower, her feet slips and she falls into the pond, She is saved from drowning by Jagu. After this incident jagu considers Uma as his sister, and Uma considers Jagu as her brother.

Two years later Uma loses her father Basu Gudia. After the demise of her father her pampered childhood disappeared. She and her mother are dependent on the mercy of her uncle and aunt. They were cruelly treated by her aunt and uncle. They became strangers in their own home. Even on festival time of Kuanara Punein neither her aunt or uncle thought of getting her a new cloth for her. During this festival time girls look forward to play. But she was not given permission by her uncle due to last year's conflict. Uma a girl of Fifteen years old is treated worse by her aunt. She is given more works. She is not provided a morsel of food. She is beaten up by her aunt. Uma displays pleasantness in front of Jagu and hides her miseries that she undergoes in the hands of her uncle and aunt. Uma is harassed by her uncle and aunt. She bears her torture quietly. She is patient enough that she never says a word of her suffering to anyone. Uma is sent to fetch water from the river when the ponds are already parched and dead. The wells in the lane are dry. Thus Uma is subjected to cruelty, starvation, and displacement. Her quiet endurance reflects how hunger erodes dignity and silences agency.

Jagu's transformation from the son of a wealthy landlord to a beggar illustrates famine's levelling power, reducing privilege to vulnerability. Jagu is the son of the wealthy landlord old

Padhan. He is a careless young man who sets his brotherly affections towards Uma. . He is unable to bear the plight of Uma starving in his uncle's and aunt's house. Therefore, he decides to help Uma. He requests Neti to provide a morsel of food to Uma. This reveals his character of kindness and his willingness to help people. But he is also an irresponsible man. He did not know the cares of the world and he led a life full of sophistication. He was not used to hard work.

Famine poses threat to life and survival. This is reflected in the village of Naripur and its neighbouring villages around. The villagers of Naripur depend on agriculture for their survival. The challenge that these villagers face is failure of harvest is due to drought

Further the misery of the villagers are seen when they complain to Jagu. The people in the village are starving. children are crying out in hunger. For the past three days they have cooked nothing since they do not have rice. They have sold their gold or other jewels they have. They plead to Jagu to listen to their entreaties. The ponds and the brooks have already dried up. Cows and bullocks have died since there are no dry grass for them.

Social Inequality and Hoarding

Old Padhan, the landlord, epitomises the greed of the wealthy, hoarding grain while villagers perish. The contrast between his miserliness and the desperation of the poor exposes famine as a social, not just natural, disaster. As Mohanty suggests, famine magnifies existing inequalities, deepening the divide between rich and poor. He is one person who can save them it is Jagu's father. If Jagu's father can be kind and compassionate the entire village can survive. They request Jagu to plead on their behalf. This shows the despair and helpless nature of human beings in times of crisis.

Seeing paddy or rice has become a matter of dreams to the common ordinary people. The Mahanta and Zamindars use their wealth to hoard paddy in store. The rich Zamindars are unwilling to sell the paddy.

The plight of these villagers is revealed further when they go to the court of Zamindar Pashupati. This shows the desperation of the villagers who have come to the court of zamindar with expectation and hope. They have walked several miles in the scorching heat with hungry stomachs. This shows that survival is a challenge during famine. Their efforts go in vain since the Zamindar lets them down.

The entire village for their survival looks towards the old Padhan. Old Padhan is a rich man in the village. The people in the village hope that old Padhan would provide them paddy and rice. They are ready to mortgage their land and homes for food. But the entire village knew that old Padhan was a miser and an obstinate person. The villagers approach old Padhan, but it was of no use. Since someone had told old Padhan that the famine would continue for three more years. Therefore, old Padhan has hoarded paddy. It is in times of crisis that true human nature is revealed. Such was the case of old Padhan, he was unwilling to part from his grains. During the time of famine nobody likes to give and nobody likes to die. Thus, the rich deprive the poor.

Famine as a Recurring natural disaster

Famine is a recurring one throughout the different era. For instance, in Odisha famine has been a recurrent one. During 1803 the third Marhatta war took place during which Marhattas got defeated by the English. The Oriyas were oppressed by the Marhattas. The Bengalis became the land owners of Oriyas. One such Bengali land lord was Naeb Babu. During 1814-1815 there was a famine. But along with famine came the woeful tales of the people, tales of woes and miseries, tales of starvation, tales of desperation and misery, tales of hopelessness, above all

tales of survival. Great responsibilities have been put on the shoulders of the people of the country during famine.

Humanitarianism during the crisis

A rich man named Naeb Babu opened the stores of paddy and rice to sell away. People from far and wide came and they exchanged their money or gold to buy paddy. He fulfilled the great responsibility by opening anna chatras at various places. During famine saving the lives of the people becomes an important mission. Especially by the rulers or by the government. When Jagu visits his uncle's house in the village of Pupura village, he notices the British officers setting up tents to remedy the shortage of food. The British officers plan to open a place where food can be distributed to the poor at any time.

According to Uma and her mother 15th May 1866 is the worst year due to famine. People who live in village. are starving. Due to starvation the villagers in Bauria lane are forced to eat lily roots. People have started eating boiled grass. Therefore, grasses are no longer available and even they have become scarce. The situation has become very worst they people just have their children to eat. Hunger forces people to do unimaginable things.

It is morsel of food that sustains life. The impact of the famine always hits the poor people first. The poor people starve on one side and they try their best to sell whatever gold or jewellery they are hoping to purchase rice for their starving children. But the prices of the rice soar high. Out of no choice, people for their survival leave their homes and villages. People have started to migrate to other villages hoping that they may survive. The rest of the people out of no other choice are forced to eat beef. Where as in times of famine the rich are capable of using their wealth to hoard grains in their granary. The people in the village are fasting in hunger

Crisis of life and survival becomes a challenge during the famine. Every living creature in the ponds and lakes die. Wild leaves are not seen anywhere. Due to famine the condition of the life of the people is wretched. Along with famine came disaster. Those animals that were used for farming have passed away, In addition to it there are no grasses available to feed the cows.

The villagers lift their eyes towards sky, hoping for rains. Rains which were expected during Jyestha was nowhere to be seen. People started offering prayers and sacrifice to gods. But all their efforts proved to be futile. The lands were broken. There was weeping and cries of despair that did not reach the abode of lord Indra, the following month of Asadha rains began to lash the Indra. They expected that during crisis businessmen will come with paddy for business, but no business man came. So, the cost of paddy increased. For a meagre meal people had to mortgage their lands and homes. The rich landlords stopped buying and selling since they anticipated Famine. Famines created terror in the minds of the people. They became helpless that some of them began to beg. Other started to leave their homes and villages. Famine struck the village of Naripur.

Famine as a Monster

The narrative frequently personifies famine as a monstrous force devouring human life and morality. Hunger turns neighbours into looters and survivors into thieves, suggesting that scarcity corrodes ethical boundaries. Literature here functions as testimony, capturing how famine dismantles the very fabric of society. Padhan on the other hand was collecting paddy. He had three hundred cart loads of paddy in his backyard. Instead of helping the villagers in times of crisis when the entire village was starving. He refused to share paddy with them. As a result of which everyday people were perishing. The cattle were dying. Beggars from other villages have entered the villages. Hunger and famine have changed the nature of humans, forcing them to steal food. The villagers realize that Padhan's store house is full. They plead

the servant in charge to take all they have and save their children. But the man points out their inability to repay them back.

The villagers of Naripur left their village leaving half-dead children behind. They have travelled several miles in search of food in the middle of the scorching heat with a hungry stomach. They reach the court room of Zamindar Pasupathi Babu. In this court yard there was Jala chatras which was opened to feed the hungry and thirsty. Survival was the greatest challenge especially without water and food for the villagers. This also shows that showing compassion to the fellow human being and helping them in times of need is essential to save the lives of other people.

Rains are seen as blessings. Draught and famine are seen as curse due to the wrath of the gods. The panic that famine brings in can make people behave monstrously. When survival becomes a challenge and Food is of utmost importance for survival. For food people started stealing. some even began looting way wealth, murdering others in the midday. Some even began to barge in to other people's house, took away their paddy and rice, set the house on fire. Such was the cruel nature of mankind for a morsel of grain and it further reveals that a man can do anything when driven by hunger. For instance, in the novel when Uma loses her mother due to cholera. Her uncle and aunt continue to torture her. Their torture has become unbearable to Uma. So, Uma decides to leave their house, at the same time she is very much aware of the dangers and consequences of famine and plague. Uma is willing to take the risk. She decides to summon her courage to stand up. On one side Uma is gripped with fear , she wonders how will she undertake her journey when all the cattle of Naripur have died of smallpox and foot and mouth disease, untouched corpses lying on the hot sand with four vultures preying the corpse.

Jagu returns from his uncle's house and he is shocked to see plight of Uma, who looks like a beggar woman from the street. He tells to Uma about the plight of the people in the country. According to Jagu "...Whichever village I entered, everywhere people are weeping and crying. without food people are lying on the streets with potsherd on hand. All skin and bones"(*Kanhu Charan Mohanty 100*) Jagu assures Govinda shah, his uncle that his would soon return with a sack of rice or paddy. But when Jagu does not turn up with a sack of Paddy or rice, Gobinda Sahu becomes furious that he and his wife taint Uma's relationship with Jagu. Uma is asked to leave the House. Even though she decides to wait for the arrival of Jagu she leaves the village of Naripur.

Survival, Migration, and Compassion

Uma's Journey towards survival begins. When hunger strikes the root of life nothing else matters including doing just or unjust, following law and order. It makes them monstrous. This can be seen when the villagers of Naripur set fire to the old Padhan's house and they carried away all the paddy and rice. Thus, famine is so powerful that it can make humans monstrous. The same day Jagu lost his father. The same day his societal position also underwent a change. As long as his father was alive with loads of paddy and rice, jagu was the son of a rich landlord. But the moment the villagers burnt the house of the landlord and took away the loads of paddy and rice. Jagu became a common ordinary man. From this one can observe that famine is so powerful to change the situations and human behaviour. Now after losing everything, everyone in the village shunned him. He had to stand in front of other people's house. nobody opened their doors to him. Jagu himself tells to Boia "...Today I am a beggar on the street" (*Kanhu Charan Mohanty 177*). Jagu realizes that he does not have the ability to feed anyone. He deicides to go in search of the needs of life. He leaves Naripur. Here begins Jagu's journey towards survival.

The journey taken by these two characters in the novel is the hardest one. A journey towards survival in times of famine is the hardest one especially when food becomes scarce. When death takes the life of every living creature, when plague strikes and people look lifeless beings fear and panic grips the remaining survivors. It takes strongest will power, determination and favourable circumstances to undertake the journey towards survival.

The journeys of Uma and Jagu underscore famine as a catalyst for displacement. Migration in search of food becomes central to survival. Uma's journey was not the easiest one. Her only companion during her journey was Moti's mother. Both of them reach a village where they come across Anna chatras. The setting up of Anna chatra reveals the human nature during the hardest time of Famine. The purpose of setting Anna chatra is to provide food to those who are starving from hunger and suffering due to famine. This again depicts that humans can be generous and they can help one another in times of need. The Abbot of the monastery Paramananda Paramahansa was a rich godly man, he was unable to see the plight of people suffering due to famine. The cries of the innocent people fell on his ears and with the wealth he had, he sent his caretakers to open Anna chatras. He issued orders to them to collect rice and paddy ,In order to ensure everyone is fed. Thus, Paramananda saved the lives of other people. Paramananda Paramahansa highlights the potential for solidarity amidst crisis and compassion.

The same man was able to show compassion to Uma and Moti's mother. He provides her a job to cook for the Kangalas. He decides to look after Uma like her father. Uma was given to work along with the cook but when Mahanta was about to depart Uma decides to leave along with Mahanta to Puri. The Mahanta leaves Uma under the care of Radhi. Feeding everyone and collecting food materials also remained a challenge. Therefore, card was issued only to the people of Mahanta's region. Those who had cards were given food.

Famine is so powerful that can bring the mightiest and powerful persons into paupers. When famine strikes, it strikes everyone, irrespective of their caste, creed, touchable, or untouchable, mighty men or common ordinary men. Jagu leaves Naripur. For his survival he sought employment and he was employed by Mr. Pattanaik, a zamindar from Nimatira village. He was employed to dig the pond. Jagu decides to earn his bread and he decides to work hard. Earlier as long as he was in his village of Naripur he led a sophisticated life. He was not used to hard work nor was he used to being responsible. But now due to famine and starvation he had to work hard and be responsible. At nights he sleeps under a tree and he works during the day time. He is unjustly accused of stealing gold necklace from Hema's neck, he leaves the village. He comes across villagers who have pulled grass from the fields due to hunger and they have plucked leaves from trees and chewed them. Many of them have become physically weak that they are unable to move. Within them fear, sadness and hopelessness radiate.

He faced a lot of obstacles to survive. He comes across a village which has been struck by epidemic of cholera. Due to this epidemic nobody is willing to open the doors. In each house dead bodies are decomposing. Jagu continues to walk for miles ignoring the tiredness of body and the mind. He realizes that man's courage gets defeated against the forces of nature. He becomes tired. His tongue becomes parched. In the middle of the field he notices a draught of water, but he finds it abhorrent when he sees a decomposed body. But out of no other option he drinks it. His legs became tired, his eyes begin to droop. He sits under a tree at the end of the village. He could see that men have been defeated grappling with monstrous famine and they have sacrificed themselves for the satisfaction of the famine monster. Thus famine has been personified as a monster that devours people. The dead bodies of the people are consumed by jackal and dogs. In spite of facing so much of sufferings, Jagu did not lose the hope of survival. He stumbles upon many dead bodies but still he does not lose hope. He comes across a small cottage. He sees a mother trying to feed her sick son with cooked rice. Jagu approaches

the old woman for a handful of rice. Jagu snatches the rice from the old woman, knocking her to the ground. He consumes the rice and walks towards the Annachhatra. The torture of hunger was unbearable to him. But the crowd had gathered even before the Annachhatra opened. People were falling all over on those who were serving food. All most each and every day there was rush by people who were physically weak and exhausted, people would fall and die every day. Jagu manages to survive by feeding on the leftover of the dead, at times he was forced to steal from the storehouse of the Annachhatra.

While he walked from the village of Mukunda, great flood came and as a result of which Jagu lost many of his co travellers due to storm, chill fevers and other diseases. Jagu took refuge in the trees due to the floods. When the waters receded, he sought shelter on the ground. He suffers from fever, but soon recovers lacking strength to survive. He reaches Puri, the land of pilgrimage of Lord Jagannath. Jagu no longer has the strength to walk. He wanders at various places and he arrives at the temple of Loknath. He drank water from the pond, he comes across the dead body of Benu, He suffers from loose motion that makes him more weak. So he becomes physically weak without proper food and water. The dead body lifters put him in a bullock cart. Jagu tells them that He would like to live. Jagu is taken into the care by Sadananda. Uma along with Sadananda goes to see the patient who is none other than Jagu. Jagu after seeing Uma sigh his last breath. Thus, Jagu Pradhan succumbs to the fury of famine. Thus, this novel is a tale of survival and it further highlights that man's survival in time of crisis is not the easiest one. In conclusion, the portrayal of despair, hunger, and death in literature serves as a poignant reminder of the devastating impact of famine on individuals and communities. Through evocative storytelling and vivid imagery, writers bring to light the harsh realities faced by those who endure food shortages and starvation. By exploring these themes with empathy and compassion, literature provides a platform for understanding and reflection on the human experience in times of crisis.

Conclusion

Mohanty's *The Famine* is not only a literary chronicle of the Odisha famine but also a profound meditation on survival, inequality, and human endurance. By portraying famine as both a physical calamity and a moral crucible, the novel affirms literature's capacity to memorialise human suffering. The translation by Manoj Kumar Das amplifies this regional narrative, situating it within broader discourses of famine literature and postcolonial trauma studies.

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