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Shailajananda Mukherjee: A Study of Regional Consciousness and Societal Realism

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Abstract:
Regionalism describes situations in which different religious or ethnic groups with distinctive identities coexist within the same state boundaries, often concentrated within a particular region and sharing strong feelings of collective identity. In the Indian context, regionalism refers to the assertion of specific ethnological, lexical or financial interests shared by different communities within the nation. It is a belief and political identity that seeks to advance the causes of specific regions. In Bengali Literature the theory of Regionalism or "Regional Literature" finds a unified expression in the novels and short stories of Shailajananda Mukherjee (1901-1976). He appeared as a prominent Regional Novelist in Bengali Literature after Tarashankar Bandopadhyay (1898-1971). He attained popularity for his wonderful short stories depicting the life of the labourers in the coal fields near his hometown. He has been able to transcribe faithfully and with vivid realism the personal experience of the grim tragedy of the coal miners without any emotive imposition. He was so entwined with the culture of his native place that all his novels and short stories delineate the beauty and essence of Birbhum with sublime confidence. In this paper, I intend to explore selected short stories of Shailajananda Mukherjee to examine his keen observation of Birbhum and its coal miners.

Keywords: Regionalism, Ethnic, Tragedy, Communities, Bengali Literature.

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Introduction

Phyllis Eleanor Bentley, in her booklet – *The English Regional Novel*, defines the regional novel as "a novel which concentrates on a particular part, a particular region of a nation, depicts the life of that region in such a way that the reader is conscious of the characteristics which are unique to that region and differentiate it from others in the common motherland". (Bentley 6) Regionalism emerged when industrialization transformed the landscapes of the world. It has been perceived across the entire globe as civilizations experienced a transformation from rural life to urban life - an existential shift in people's mindsets. It represents a nostalgic response to the society's vast changes. Almost every work of regional fiction employs a specific setting as the focal point of the narrative. The unique representation of the local colour, custom, dialect and characters is preserved in the text. There is not only a shift in the cultures; there is also an emphasis on their endurable effect on the characters of the people as well as their skin colour and the orature that gives the stories their authoritative value. A key feature of regional fiction is the narrative distance maintained by a narrator whose origin or class differs from that of the residents. A variation involves a narrative voice that is separated by erudition or marked by an ironic tone. The basic difference between regional fiction and mainstream realism is in its selection of local or rural instead of any ultramodern urban subject and its intense involvement with the tradition followed by common people quite unnoticeable in the literary landscape, such as the poor class, ethnically marginalized sections and the elderly class; moreover, unlike traditional and canonical fictions, the market for local colour got an additional edge about downtrodden and socially underprivileged class.

In the words of Frederick Turner, who echoed D.H. Lawrence's literary theory, one finds regionalism called "the spirit of place". In literature this "Spirit of place" emerges from a sense of

strong acceptance and affection. Readers experience an exchange of strong emotions when socially deprived classes receive literary space that reflects society. This "Spirit of place" can be overshadowed by the "Spirit of Time", everywhere, whether in human history or in the profound, hidden or foundational aspects of the earth's crust. This fosters a deeper understanding of nature that creates a three-dimensional sense of memory and life, while also emphasizing the inculcation of local values that finds a proper shape in literature. In regional novels, writers immerse themselves completely in local customs, internalize them, along with the hidden customs, the sub cultures and the local idioms and phrases articulated by the people of a given location.

The effervescence of regionalism appears everywhere, from English fiction to American fiction. The depiction of regional elements, along with the thematic construction of these novels, is clearly evident in most of them. In English fiction, the term is associated with the novels of George Eliot - stories of her youth - and with the immortal creations of Thomas Hardy, whose fictional landscape is centered on Wessex, which mirrors Dorsetshire. To add to the concept in England, we can even include *Wuthering Heights*, the wonderful creation of Emily Bronte, set in the moors of Yorkshire. The notable works of D.H. Lawrence are set in the disturbed region affected by the conflict between industrialism and agriculture -the rural landscape of Nottingham. While all these novels are set in England's rural landscapes, the authors do not confine themselves, either topographically or subconsciously to the country. There is always a conflict between agrarian culture and the modern city culture that manifests itself in examples such as the contrast between Wuthering Heights and Thundercross Grange, for instance or in urban sophistication, which in various forms draws attention to George Eliot's Hetty Sorrel and Maggie Tulliver, and Lawrence's Paul Morrel and Ursula Bragwen. Although the city attracts some of Hardy's immortal characters, Hardy more frequently concerns himself with the changes wrought on the idyllic life-

with transitions from a communal tenant - farming network to an individualistic and disconnected agricultural existence. In England regional novels emerged when the country moved towards industrialization.

The vivid delineation of the landscape is the most essential element of regional novel, and Hardy in particular is noted for making nature come alive in his novels. In his novels, the description of the local surroundings and the author's minute details enhance the appeal of the work. Hardy gives his readers the impression "that nature has a quasi-human life". (Holloway1965) This is an attempt on his part to bridge the distance between human society - with all its complications and rigidities - and the natural world, which enjoys the immense freedom to enjoy and manifold happiness of nature. D. H. Lawrence, following Hardy, evokes a different view of the limitless freedom of the natural world. He emphasizes the basic characteristics of humanity. He opines that whatever in human life is natural is not mechanical, thereby establishing a link between humanity and the rest of the natural world. In a late essay, Lawrence describes the individual as "a deep pool, or tarn, in the mountain, fed from beneath by unseen springs." (Lawrence 1970) These "unseen springs" portray humanity's unbiased connection to the entire world of nature – a connection rooted in the human unconscious and the survival instinct. In most of Lawrence's novels, we observe his characters expressing their excessive lust along with the advancement of spring; and the amorous relationship between Paul Morel and Miriam Leivers also evolves out of "their common feeling for something in nature". (Lawrence 1962)

The industrial revolution brought profound transformation by the end of 19th century. People left their village to seek a more comfortable life in urban cities. With the invention of machinery and new equipment, the U.S. economy shifted its emphasis to factory production; Americans no longer had to depend on agriculture to support their families. At the same time,

immigrants from all over the world crowded into tenements to take advantage of new urban opportunities. During this period of continuous change in American regional life, sweeping economic, social, and political shifts ushered in American realism. Writing in this period was predominantly regional. The Industrial Revolution led to greater standardization, mass production of goods and effective channels of distribution. It spurred a burgeoning of modern life in America which alarmed people over their gradual loss of folkways and traditions. As a response to these sentiments, realistic writers in America set their stories in specific U.S. regions, seeking to capture regional customs and traditions before they were permanently effaced from the nation's memory. They drew upon the sometimes-grim realities of everyday life, depicting the disintegration of traditional values and the growing plight of the new urban poor. In American realist literature, the plots and characters revolved around the lives of ordinary people. In addition, their literary works featured regional dialects and extensive depictions of public life. As a result, readers could perceive the grim realities of life while reading the stories, even as romantic writers were critiqued by the public for their embedded symbolism and allegorical references. William Faulkner's Mississippi, Mark Twain's Hannibal, Steinbeck's Salinas and so on- the gradual creation of these new literary landscapes of specific places - was a response to the more common belief that the landscape Americans inhabited was, as Frederick Jackson Turner argued, "a historical landscape, one without spirit and without life". (Turner 1989)

Historical Background

The literary renaissance was a continuous struggle to carve out space for nationalism. The novel, as a genre, was a dominant form in contemporary Indian English literature under British influence during the nineteenth century, and it served as one of the platforms to openly discussing social issues. The novels published from the 1860s to the late nineteenth century were written by

writers who were part of English – educated, sophisticated class of Indians and were highly influenced by the enlightening and progressing ideals of the Bengal Renaissance. However, the novels that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century offer a complex understanding rather than showing a deviation. In no other periods in Indian English Literature and in Indian society was there such a strong influence of a foreign literature and an alien culture. Indian fiction writers in English displayed their familiarity with the classics by using epigraphs from Byron, Shakespeare or Coleridge, with quotations and references spread generously throughout the fictions irrespective of the narrative need. Regarding the emergence of Indian English Fiction, Meenakshi Mukherhjee writes in her Twice Born Fiction (2005)

> "Since Bengal was the first region to come in close contact with the British, the earliest Indian novels came to be written in Bengali. The first few attempts consist of sketches of contemporary Bengali society, but the new genre really became established with the historical novel form. It is interesting to note that the novel emerged at different times in different regions of India, but almost everywhere the first crop showed a preoccupation with historical romance. In fact, the full development of the Indian novel as a whole, allowing for certain oversimplification of details, may be divided into three large stages: (1) historical romance, (2) social or political realism, (3) psychological novels showing an introspective concern with the individual. In most Indian languages — especially in Bengali, Hindi, Marathi, Kannada and Malayalam — the developments occurred in this order, although not simultaneously." (Mukherjee)

M.K. Naik and Shyamala A. Narayan contend that a writer can be universal only if they are "intensely regional" (Naik 250). They affirm: "It is only by writing with your own region in your bones that you can be true to the kindred points of home and the universe" (Naik 250-1). This

raises questions about the authenticity of writers. The claims to superiority of Indian English or bhasha writers can be evaluated solely on the basis of how true they are to their roots and how successfully they addressed the "earthy, native traditions which are specific to place and time" (Nemade 239). Such novels raise hope of gradually overcoming the conspicuous dichotomy between English and regional novels in India. In Bengali literature, Shailajananda Mukherjee was an extraordinary Bengali author who sparked a revolution in regional literature by shifting focus to the working – class lives of coal miners and Santal tribes, particularly those around the coal fields of Bengal and Jharkhand. He flourished in the era of Rabindranath Tagore and Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, when writers like Manindralal Bose were highly popular for their romantic tales. At that time, Shailajananda introduced a distinctly raw, realist tone. As a pioneer of regional mining literature, he is credited with bringing the "smell of coal" into Bengali literature with works such as Koyla Kuthi (1922), which portrayed the routine struggles, moments of happiness, and existential vulnerabilities of workers in the coal mines, setting a new trend in realism. He gained prominence through *Probasi* Magazine, which published his early stories about the coal mine region, making him a subject of curiosity in the literary world. Although he had a distinctive voice, Shailajananda later became one of the key figures in the renowned "Kallol" magazine group, which championed social realism and sociopolitical consciousness in literature. Unlike the romantic, polished style that dominated the period, his writing offered a gritty glimpse into the pitiful life of the proletariat and coalfield communities, who were quite reluctant to abandon the harsh realities of their existence. He is known as the father of subaltern or lower-class literature in Bengali. Unlike the earlier writers, his stories introduced specific marginalized communities - Santal-Barui classes and coal mine workers -into the literary arena.

Discussion

In this research document, we examine three short stories: “Koyla Kuthi” (Coal Depo) and “Raising Report” and “Maran Baron”. In all three, the author vividly portrays the grim realities of life for coal miners and highlights the plight of the Santal community in the Raniganj Coalfield. The Raniganj Coalfield is primarily located in the Asansol and Durgapur subdivisions of Burdwan district in the Indian state of West Bengal. It extends into the neighbouring districts of Birbhum, Bankura, Purulia and the Dhanbad district of Jharkhand. The author meticulously captures the life, colour, nature and the attitudes of Birbhum district in his short stories. Like Hardy’s Wessex, it serves as the backdrop for all his narratives, depicting the lifestyle of rural Bengal. The core content revolves around the coal miners and the intricacies of their life. These miners are drawn from aboriginal communities, chiefly Santals and Bauris, who are known for their resilience in enduring hardships and also for their docile nature. The short story “Maran Baran”, after its publication in the *Kallol* magazine, created a sensation among readers. Here, the author demonstrates a sense of social responsibility by restrainedly portraying the exploitation of manual labour and the sexual exploitation of female labourers (kamin) in the story.

In “Koyla Kuthi”, two extreme emotions coexist: the pathetic poverty of the miners’ lives and, amidst it, there is the presence of intense love and affection. The love between the protagonists, Nanku & Bilashi, transcends their family’s financial imbalances. This love overpowers them, ultimately leading to the story’s tragic catastrophe. The author’s primary aim is to convey the emotions of the poor Santal girl Bilashi who refuses to submit to patriarchal commodification despite her poverty. In Nanku’s absence Ramna attempts to exploit her vulnerability, urging her to abandon Nanku and stay with him. Bilashi fiercely resists: she slaps away his hand and retorts, “Have you found me a ripe jackfruit? Get out.” When Ramna persists,

she grows even more furious: “I know what you mean, you scoundrel. You can’t have me”. Disappointed, Ramna retreats (author’s translation).This episode illustrates how Bilashi despite her poverty and helplessness, proclaims her immense love for Nanku until her last breath. The filth of the society cannot not tarnish her dignity; she maintains her self-respect until the final call of destiny. As a representative of the underprivileged class, she aggressively controls her emotions, and refuses to surrender to money or avarice. The narrative perspective amplifies the cry of the destitute - lost in nostalgia and desperately yearning for her lost love. Before learning of Nanku’s murder, Bilashi eagerly awaits him. Even at the fair, she wanders alone in anxiety and anticipation: “Bilasi entered the crowd in despair. On the other days, Nanku would have been with her, having betel leaves, smoking bidis, dancing the Santali dance, singing and laughing. Perhaps, she would have been scolding him, but today with a heavy heart, she just wandered around once or twice and then stood near a betel shop.” (author’s translation)

In “Raising Report”, the story depicts colonial society where British administrators, as owners of the coal fields, treat the miners’ lives trivial. They prioritize profit above all, even at the cost of human lives. A close reading reveals that Chanchal Kumar is deeply perturbed by the pathetic death of Tulia (Sohagi’s husband), whom he had sent into the mine despite knowing it was overcrowded and that further coal raising was hopeless. In a disturbed state, he confronts Mr. James: “Why did you make me a partner in this sin, Saheb? I warned you right from the beginning, but you wouldn’t heed to my words. You said, ‘I don’t want anything except more raising’. Why did you at all send that poor fellow to the ‘unsafe gallery’ despite everything I told you, Saheb?” (author’s translation) The exchange underscores the extreme exploitation of the labour class by colonial forces, rendering miners’ lives meaningless and turning helpless workers into victims of British disdain. Tulia’s death sparks a labour revolt, but it manifests not as mass rebellion but as

Chanchal Kumar's anguished cries. He repeatedly tries to awaken Mr. James's empathy, only for the manager to grow annoyed and prioritize self-interest. In a tense moment of complete darkness, Sohagi mistakes the unpleasant Chanchal Kumar for Tulia and hugs him. Mr. James misinterprets this, leading to a dismissal letter: "Chanchal I am sorry. Your services are no longer required. I dismiss you and give you orders to be cleared up and leave Colliery within 24 hours. Herewith I send a slip to the Cashier who will pay you up. You should not call for any explanation as I have seen you, with my own eyes, in the pit No.5." (Mukherjee 103) This misinterpretation and communication gap suppress Chanchal Kumar's voice, forcing him to accept that an innocent labour's life means nothing compared to the value of coal raising.

In "Maran Baran" Bhatul Majhi, father of six children, descends into the mine in desperate search of money – only for his wife and six sons are buried alive there. A careful reading reveals their pathetic plight: his wife dies first, leaving the six sons entombed together in the dark underworld tunnel. Superficially, an accident, this disaster clearly implicates the owner's negligence. The story's horrors do not end here. Bhatul remarries Ruki, whose unsatisfied physical needs leads into an affair with an English Sahib from the Coal Company. He impregnates her but shirks responsibility, securing a hasty transfer and offering her a paltry sum "The days when the Sahib had need of [her body] were now a thing of the past. Quickly pulling two rupees from his pocket, he pressed them into Ruki's hand." (author's translation) This act appalls the author, reducing a woman's value – and her unborn child – to mere transactional objects of colonial lust, devoid of human worth. Bhatul ultimately commits suicide by detonating explosives he prepared himself, vividly embodying the story's profound agony. In this narrative of deprivation and self-destruction, the raw cry of the working – class suffering stands starkly exposed.

Through these stories, the author vividly captures the regional attitudes of the Santal community in Birbhum district. Their dialect, mindset, ideology and their regional sentiments are foregrounded, with the author dexterously delineating through powerful prose. The unique focus across all stories is on marginalized lives: the coal mine coolies, their passionate love, intense devotion and exploitation at the hands of upper-class elites (sahibs, naibs). He portrays their silent suffering and helplessness against oppression, where a plethora of throttled emotions underscores the ferocity of British imperialism. Shailajananda's depictions of oppressed Santal-Barui lives strikingly resemble Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca's portrayal of marginalized gypsy life in Andalusia.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Shailajananda Mukherjee brings forth regionalism through meticulous characterization and poignant depictions of the miner's plight under colonizers. He vividly portrays the forbidding realities of their lives and the racial discrimination they endured. His stories of love among the Santals mark his pioneering journey toward regionalism, giving voice to unheard deprivations and elevating their regional dialect to literary stature. Shailajananda won glory for the illiterate by championing their cause through literature, securing himself a permanent place in Bengali letters. Contemporary author and friend Premnendra Mitra, Tarashankar Bandopadhyay is remembered in our literature for his comprehensive depiction of Bengal's regional life. Yet, Tarashankar was not the pioneer; this genre began earlier with Shailajananda's creations, which Tarashankar brought to proper fruition. Buddhadeva Bose describes Shailajananda Mukherjee as "the most detached writer ever to be born in Bengal," who, like Maupassant, "tells his story with minimum description and comment, and without divagations, whether delectable or distressing". (Bose 84)

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