

## Fakirmohan Senapati on the World Literary Map: A Study of Criticism

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### Abstract

Fakirmohan Senapati, the Odia novelist of the nineteenth century India with unmatched literary merit did not receive due recognition and can be called a literary marginal of his time. Unlike his contemporaries including Munshi Premchand, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, O Chandu Menon and many others, he was not given the much deserving critical attention and until today several of his major works are yet to be translated. Known as the father of modern Odia literature and Odia linguistic nationalism, Fakirmohan's complex literary vision need intense and deep study and his work serious negotiation although one cannot ignore the recent developments in the concerned areas. This paper traces the development of Fakirmohan studies and criticism from an insignificant low to a fairly sizable one both at the national and international levels. The discussion will show how each turn in the critical output has determinedly enhanced Fakirmohan's reputation as a novelist and helped him evolve from a regional writer into a figure of world literature. Dividing the phases of his criticism into three generic moments and each having a detail analysis of the critical works, this study will scrutinise how Fakirmohan Senapati who was initially perceived as a realist and social reformist writer has now bagged his due recognition as an exponent of post-modernist and post-colonial fiction writing. The discussion also would include references to the major breakthroughs made in the field of Fakir Mohan study and criticism and would make an analysis of the factors responsible for such interventions.

**Key Words:** postmodernist, Odia novel, colonial India, realism, mimesis, alternative modernity, post-colonialism

### Introduction

In a lecture in Cornell University, while addressing eminent south Asian researchers and scholars, eminent Indian novelist and awardee of the Indian Jnan Pitha and Padma Bhusan, U.R. Ananthamurthy commented that he found two novels in the history of modern Indian novel "foundational"; Fakir Mohan Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third* (*Chhamana Athhaguntha* in Odia language) 1897-99, and Rabindranath Tagore's *Gora* (1907-1909).<sup>1</sup>Ananthamurthy's observations are founded by the fact that Fakir Mohan's literary

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<sup>1</sup> CML, Introduction, PP-1h

merit and uniqueness are comparable to those of his contemporaries and often surpass many of them in originality, technique and complexity. Senapati's stylistic choices, use of dialect and exploration of themes related to colonialism and modernity offer valuable critical perspectives on Indian society under colonial rule and have lately provoked scholars for repeated revisits to his work.<sup>2</sup> Of late, Fakir Mohan Senapati's contributions to modern Indian fiction have come to be recognised in superlative terms. Such an observation on his modernist and post-modernist currency comes from J.H. Vargas when she says: "Startlingly, Gabriel Garcia Marquez develops a mode of representation remarkably similar to the one developed more than half a century earlier by Indian writer Fakirmohan Senapati."<sup>3</sup> Vargas refers to both the writers' deliberate rejection of the imported and imposed literary principles and patterns to interpret their reality and the creation of alternative and indigenous ones which could capture the essence of the lives in their native countries. To take Vargas's reading forward, Senapati is one among those nineteenth century India writers who "Instead of identifying modernity with what colonial rule brought with it---and choosing to either accept it in its entirety or reject it outright...defined modernity...through their complexly mediated critiques of their own social traditions..."<sup>4</sup> Fakir Mohan challenged the binary divide between the native tradition and the western modernity and developed a novel way of dramatising the content, style and language in his writing. Unfortunately, Fakirmohan's literary originality and other credentials were not often been brought under serious critical scrutiny and an obvious question haunts the readers and scholars of Senapati. The question is why a writer as masterly as Fakir Mohan Senapati has not found a place in globally like Marquez or Achebe?

In this scene of inadequate work on a writer like Fakir Mohan how can one not bring here the role and responsibilities of criticism and not think of Mathew Arnold saying: "Its business is... simply to know the best that is known and thought in the world, and by in its turn making this known, to create a current of true and fresh ideas."<sup>5</sup> Along with its plan of creating a current of ideas, criticism needs to ensure "disinterestedness", an impartiality that does not attach any biased considerations. Thus, the objective of criticism is not only for the production of good literature and creating visibility but also to provide a framework for reshaping the past (history) of literature. Oscar Wilde's observation on the changed perception on the function criticism is inclusive when he states that unlike earlier time when, "... the history of criticism was outside the history of literature" it now "provides the framework for the study of literature."<sup>6</sup> (Wilde) To paraphrase Wilde's words, criticism today influences the way some writers of the past have been perceived and with the help of revisionary changes the perception can change where needed. It is this role and function of criticism that this paper aims to analyse in the context of Fakir Mohan Senapati and his work.

Fakir Mohan's wrote and published in the later decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of twentieth century, but his fame as a writer did not cross the boundaries of Odisha until 1967, the year in which the first English translation of his novel *Chhamana Atthaguntha* (1897) was published as *The Stubble under the Cloven Hoof*.` John Boulton was the first scholar of Fakir Mohan who wrote expertly about Fakir Mohan's life, times and writings in 1967. He also traversed the entire intellectual range, producing his scholarship in English, translating him – he was the first to do an English translation of Fakir Mohan's

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<sup>2</sup> CML , Notes to the Introduction , pp17

<sup>3</sup> CML, Vargas, pp26

<sup>4</sup> CML pp3

<sup>5</sup> <http://public-library.uk/ebooks/24/100.pdf> pp7

<sup>6</sup> Wilde

autobiography *Atmajivanacharita* - , and capping it off with a monograph on Fakir Mohan which he wrote in Odia. Boulton was the first man from abroad to have transported the author beyond the Indian territories. What is more, he seems to have done so around the same time or even before similar ‘foreign travels’ or exports happened for two other Indian writers, Premchand and Bankim Chandra. Yet in a telling irony, while Premchand, mediated by Francesca Orsini, incidentally also from SOAS, and Bankimchandra, mediated by Sudipto Kaviraj, again from SOAS, entered the world imaginary as great Indian and South Asian authors, Fakir Mohan remained where he was, content with his status as a regional writer, though of the highest pedigree. It is probably this critical neglect of him that instigated Hara Prasad Das’s jeremiad in a recent article on *Chhamana Athhaguntha* (*Sambad* 15 October 2016): “Will a critique on the fictional art of *Chhamana Athhaguntha* that is of international calibre never ever see the light of day?”<sup>7</sup> Das’s lamentations are valid but it is also a fact that there has been emerging new critical works on Fakir Mohan in the last few decades with the translation *Six Acres and a Third* which caught the attention of the English academics of Odisha and in the early 1990s the critical engagement with the text became more vigorous. *Six Acres* marks an important turning point in the development of Fakir Mohan study. Prof. Rabi Shankar Mishra’s analysis of it from the new historicist perspective is a fine example of the renewed critical attention. Satya P. Mohanty read it as a post-modernist text. Several other critics followed suit and thus *Six Acres* certainly created international visibility with its wide circulation and its subsequent translations into several other languages including one into Spanish by Mauricio D. Aguilera Linde, but it could not place the author on the same pedestal on which Achebe, Bankim, Premchand, Marquez and several others were placed. Among the major important reasons for such neglect, the issue of language is one. Fakir Mohan wrote in Odia, a provincial and during the time almost a minority language (In 2014 it received the status of a classical language of India) and many did not know it to be a different language than Bangla. Odia suffered double marginality and twice removed from the mainstream literary activities of nineteenth century India. An observation by Francesca Orsini cannot be more pertinent than here. In her essay “India in the Mirror of World Fiction” she says English language is privileged in the Indian society as it has been projected as a lingua franca due to the language’s American-based global ascendancy and the frequent use of the language by the urban middle class of the country. “English is the language in which most Indians would read Dostoevsky, Maupassant or Mann. English alone commands international access to Western publishing houses, journals and prizes.”<sup>8</sup> The reverse would work on Senapati and he could secure reading of his work by a large audience only if he used English.

Fakir Mohan Senapati is not widely translated even until today. His iconic short story “Rebati” was the first Odia short story, written in 1898, and now has been translated to 36 languages that include Indian and international. *Chhamana Athhaguntha* and his autobiography *Atmcharita* are the other two books that have been translated. As a result, the assessment of his literary quality has not fully evolved and the first major book length work on him in English was published in 2011. Although some very fine critical essays have been written on Senapati in Odia by professors of Odia like Gaganendra Nath Dash and Dasarathi Das, but have limited readership.

The introduction written to a work with by an insightful editor can play a significant role in provoking readers and establishing an author at any level. For example, the fascinating and refreshing introduction written to Fakir Mohan Senapati’s 2005 translation *Six Acres and*

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<sup>7</sup> *The Sambad* 15 October 2016

<sup>8</sup> (Orsini,86)

*a Third* by Satya Prakash Mohanty not only serves as a lead to the text but also highlights the postmodern reading experience that the book has been able to create. Thus it connects the local (book) to the global (movement) in a synchronic manner. In the following paragraph S.P. Mohanty describes the narrator of *Six Acres*:

Central to the narrative mode is a narrator who actively mediates between the reader and the subject of the novel, drawing attention away from the tale to accentuate the way it is told. Until we become comfortable with the narrator and his verbal antics, join him in witty interchange, and ponder our own implication as readers in the making and unmaking of facts, both narrative and social, we cannot say that we have fully engaged with Senapati's sly and exhilarating text.<sup>9</sup>

Mohanty illustrates how through the narrator of the text Senapati is inviting the readers to participate in the production of meanings and facts in this text which is what postmodernist texts aim to create. The 2022 translation of *Six Acres and a Third* which has been able to capture the tone of the author more accurately has an afterword that should have created the similar impact. The afterword includes a discussion on the narrator and his mediation between the text and the reader but it misses out on the links to connect it to postmodernism which would have created a much more global impact.

Dearth of criticism, several texts untranslated, not included in world literature curriculum Fakir Mohan's work calls for extensive study and research. In order to make that possible, a thorough understanding of the major shifts in his criticism is required and this paper aims to achieve that by studying the various phases of criticism written on him. It will attempt to give a fuller and more elaborate account of the generic moments in the evolving trajectory of Fakir Mohan criticism oriented towards establishing his reputation in the international arena. Three such moments or waves of criticism can be readily identified.

### ***Generic Moment I***

The first generic moment is represented by John Victor Boulton's work on Fakir Mohan. This pronouncement of course goes hand in hand with the realisation that somehow this moment did not take off despite similar moments in Hindi and Bengali criticism of the novel soaring. This was partly because of the inadequacy in Boulton's conceptualisation of the novel and of Fakir Mohan's novel in particular. It was also partly due the deficiencies in the Odia critical discourse on the genre of novel of the time. Boulton's essentially humanist and commonsensical approach did not go beyond an appreciation of the traditionalist features of Fakir Mohan's novelistic art. The following lines contain Boulton's critical diagnosis in a nutshell:

Fakir Mohan's novels contrast aristocrats like the Bagha Simhas of Ratanpur in *Cha Mana Atha Guntha*, Pratap Udit Malla in *Mamu* and Vaisnava Carana Mahapatra in *Prayaschita* with upstarts like Mangaraja in *Cha Mana Atha Guntha*, Natabara Dasa in *Mamu* and Sankarsana Mahanti in *Prayaschita*. The aristocrat embodies the values of the old regime: the upstarts the materialism of the British rule. (88)

As anyone who has read Fakir Mohan's novels critically will testify, this diagnosis is woefully inadequate. The point about the contrast is certainly true, but not to notice the massive investment of narrative and libidinal energy of Fakir Mohan's fiction in the so called evil figures, the Iagos and Edmunds, as it were, is to grossly underestimate the elements of

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<sup>9</sup> *Six Acres and a Third* (2005) pp3

modernity in Fakir Mohan's fictions. In a presentation of the novel that the novelist's son Mohini Mohan wrote for the 1928 edition of *Chhamana Atthaguntha*, there was a bracing registration of this modernity. Mohini Mohan broke away from the prevailing moralism to declare himself strongly on the side of the social Darwinism, even Nietzscheanism of this seemingly moralistic tale by his father. Here is a sample from Mohini Mohan's fascinating analysis.

They (Mangaraj and Champa) fell as swiftly as they had risen. Many will cite this as an example of the defeat of evil. But mother nature is blind to virtue and vice, good and evil. Many in this world have occupied high places through means that are unjust, unholy and exploitative. If we examine grand empires in history, we will see at their roots not religion, but its graveyard. (81)

Boulton's 'pre-theory' criticism, as Kate Flint, Professor of English at Oxford termed it in 1996, did not have the traction and gumption needed to deal with a fictional discourse as complex, ambivalent and self-reflexive as Fakir Mohan's.

As a matter of fact, Fakir Mohan's narrative discourse has a critical framework built into it. Boulton notices the talkative, garrulous, pleader-like narrator of *Chhamana*, but stops short at seeing how, to quote Jennifer Harford Vargas, "Senapati's varyingly dialogized narrative modes structurally generate the text's critical framework (30)." Likewise, Boulton notices Fakir Mohan's realism, but does not make enough of a realism that is anything but plain and straightforward.

This 'untheoreticism' also marks the Odia critical discourse on the novel of that time. Aptly summed up in Natabara Samantaray's magisterial observation (Fakir Mohan's four novels embody two hundred years of the history of Odisha) it sets out to answer Boulton's moralism with its own brand of moralism and historicism. No wonder this first generic moment generated little by way of hermeneutics or comparatist readings or translational activism.

### ***Generic Moment II***

Several years were to pass before the rise of the second wave in Fakir Mohan criticism. There were no scholars from abroad during this phase but Odia academicians and intellectuals were involved, especially in the English departments, meant that their project was carried out under the glare of international academic currents. Two such currents can be readily identified: comparative studies and postcolonial theory. Sambalpur University's English department was the first in Odisha to offer comparative literature as a specialisation. This gave a new vantage point from which to read the Odia literary works by liberating it from its land-lockedness. The Sambalpur University course, for example, brought together Dickens's *Hard Times* and *Chhamana*, Hardy's *Woodlanders* and Kalindi Charan Panigrahi's *Matira Manisha* and so on. The juxtaposition of the master text from the centre and the off centre marginalised text – marginalised on the double grounds of colonisation and presentation in a minoratised language - allowed an unravelling of the subversive potential of the marginalised text. The instructive case of the comparative study of the *Hard Times* and *Chhamana* can be cited here. Written collaboratively by Himanshu Shekhar Mohapatra and Jatindra Kumar Nayak, the study shows how Dickens's famed critique of utilitarianism or the cult of fact pales away in comparison with Fakir Mohan's more incisive and nuanced critique of the same social philosophy. As a matter of fact, his fictional presentation grasps it as a social ideology that is serviceable to colonial administration.

This mode of reading also allowed a further significant disclosure, namely that the non-Anglophone or non-Western novel does not lack in a textural and discursive density unlike its Western counterpart, but has an embarrassment of riches that for a fine-grained analysis. Two passages in *Chhamana* in particular have attracted such an analysis. These are the narrator's commentary on the goings in at the village pond in the Asuradighi and the report filed by the daroga in a later chapter. While the first is a highly allegorical and coded representation where the pond with its plethora of aquatic life preyed on by an equally busy aerial life - of prey animals and predators, in Paul L. Sawyer's beautiful phrasing - symbolises colonial exploitation, the second gives us an image of the inherent social dynamism of a backwater place displayed in its rich social heteroglossia, its graphic echoing, miming and parodying of the dialects and registers that swirl about in society.

Reading *Chhamana* this way alerts us to the "textual productivity" of a text, its sensuous overload that was earlier reserved only for the texts of the venerated Western tradition. To quote Mohapatra and Nayak: "If textuality is what at stake, then, of course, *Chhamana* is easily the rival of *Hard Times* and surely the equal of other dialogic novels of the West" (85). Comparatism was the ruling theme of the second generic moment. During the one decade that this moment spanned comparative studies proliferated. Comparative studies took the form of influence and intertextual studies, demonstrated by the several such subsequent attempts at bringing together Lal Behari Day's *Bengal Peasant Life* with *Chhamana*, *Mamu* with Gopinath Mohanty's *Danapani* and H.E. Beal's *Indian Ink* and also in Gaganendra Nath Dash's playing off of Fakir Mohan against Lakshminath Bejbaroa. Many of the scholarly work generated during this wave have been compiled in the volume *Fakir Mohan Senapati: Perspectives on His Fiction* (2005), edited by JK Nayak.

### **Generic Moment III**

It was becoming clear that further hermeneutic breakthrough in Fakir Mohan criticism could happen only after a vigorous rewriting of Fakir Mohan in English. Translation, in other words, was the way forward. A new English translation of *Chhamana* was in progress. It was the work of multiple authors and in an internationalising gesture that would count as the most ambitious this translation was being undertaken for the University of California Press. After being in gestation for over five years it finally saw the light of day as *Six Acres and a Third* in 2005 with a Penguin reprint coming out in 2006. A new translation with international visibility occasioned a fresh burst of interpretive activity, starting with a conference in Delhi University in January 2007, a conference at Cornell University in the summer of 2008 and ending with a volume of critical essays in 2011 aptly titled *Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: A View from India*, edited by Satya P. Mohanty who had also written a masterly introduction to *Six Acres and Third*. This third generic moment projected the novel beyond Indian, making it walk with the acknowledged masters of world fiction such as George Eliot, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie.

For *Chhamana* to be seen as a 'foundational' novel in modern Indian literature, to use U.R. Ananthamurthy's epithet, a critical framing of the novel had to be imperative. In this third generic moment it was found to be taking place. And the framing informs as much the new translation as the interpretations contained in the CML volume. The history of the translation needs to be retraced briefly in order for this perspective to be understood. The three earlier translations of the novel bore the following titles: *Stubble under the Cloven Hoof*, *A Plot of Land* and *Six Acres and Half*. A translation is also an interpretation and it is so right from the word go. We can see how the titles encode particular ways of seeing and relating to the novel. The biblical resonance of the first title stands out, but it does not mean

that the other two titles do not signify anything. They signify precisely the ideal of fidelity to the original by considerably playing down translational activism. With the new translation then there is bound to be a return to activism. The biblical frame of reference sits uneasily with a social realistic novel that is now being more ambitiously positioned as a postcolonial novel par excellence. The abandoned first title of the novel, *Property and Theft: A Novel of Colonial India*, which was later, published as *Six Acres and a Third* cues us about this postcolonial rewriting of Fakir Mohan's Odia novel. Admittedly this would make for a monstrous title for a work of fiction and it was dropped. But it left a reader in no doubt about the postcolonial critical framing of the novel, its situatedness, its specificity and its radical social critique. Another thing went into the mix as well: a new understanding of the novelistic, formulated by Mikhail Bakhtin, meaning the idea of the novel as a site of dialogic encounters, of collision of dialects and discourses. The introduction of *Six Acres and a Third* by Satya P. Mohanty aligns the postcolonial idea of cultural self-determination with the Bakhtinian view of the novel as polyphonic and his own post-positivist notion of a realism that is analytical and epistemic. Fakir Mohan's tale underwent a complete metamorphosis, its pre-history finally over and done with.

The extent of metamorphosis of *Chhamana Athaguntha* can be judged from the nine chapters assembled in the CML volume and the special articles on the novel under the rubric "the literary view from below", published in *Economic and Political Weekly* in 2006 and 2008. Out of these two essays are especially defining and will be revisited here: one by Jennifer Harford Vargas titled "Critical Realisms in the Global South: Transcultured Narrative in Senapati's *Six Acres and a Third* and Garcia and Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*" and the other by Paul L. Sawyer titled "An Oriya Village and the Battle of Plassey: Senapati's Allegory of the Raj." Harford Vargas's is a comparative study of two novels from the global south: *Chhamana* and the critically acclaimed and influential *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Yet Vargas's bold claim is that Fakir Mohan is one of the illustrious forerunners of Garcia Marquez. Both of their narratives are invested in an analysis of the socio-political realities of a colonial and neo-colonial world. Both deploy forms of 'critical realism' which cut through the surface layers of myth and social ideologies to get at the truth while allowing realism to filter through the 'underground modes' of storytelling native to their own societies. Senapati makes use of an unreliable narrator, aptly labelled by Satya P. Mohanty as the 'touter-narrator'. This finds its analogue in the figure of the *mammadore de gallo* that Garcia Marquez employs. Likewise both Senapati and Garcia Marquez show a penchant for transculturation, a concept akin to Bakhtin's concept of carnivalization. This is about how folk and popular discourses reshape elite and high-brow forms and conventions to produce new narrative forms. Senapati's analytical realism is thus seen to be not a thing apart from Garcia Marquez's 'marvellous realism.'

Sawyer's essay shows *Chhamana* as reaching the very heights of realist fiction whereby realism as we know it is both confirmed and contested. Nothing illustrates this better than the narrator's distinctive and inimitable voice which is verbose and digressive, but is at the same time verbosely fearful of verbosity and digression. The novel achieves in the process a complex realism, demonstrating the continuous tension between mixtures and extremes, plain style and a patterned style, record and reportage and self-parody. It communicates both on the micro-level – disposal of six and a third acres of Bhagia and Saria – and macro-level – British colonial exploitation of Odisha/India. The rapidly shifting language and style produces an active, critical reader in the style of postmodernism, but sans the characteristic postmodernist doubt about truth-claims. Sawyer also makes a persuasive

case for Fakir Mohan's vision of human existence, seeing it as materialist, embodied, animal and ecological.

## **Conclusion: Welcome Convergence**

The essays by Harford Vargas and Sawyer together with the rest of the essays of the CML volume and the two EPW special issues situate 'Fakir Mohan on the world map.' This is clear from the way *Chhamana Athaguntha* has been consistently read in this third generic moment as an articulation of two things: 'the view from below' and 'alternative modernity', also called 'vernacular modernity' in an essay in the CLM volume. The revolutionary nature of this hermeneutic intervention needs to be underlined and recognised. Both are paradigm shifting moves.

The first theme prepares us to see *Chhamana Athaguntha* as a profound anti-colonial novel. The second shifts the emphasis from a view of the novel as a record of colonial modernity to a view of it as an inscription of an 'alternative modernity.' This leads to the insight that the pre-colonial, oral modes on which the novel draws and which it 'transculturates' with print-literate modes of colonial modernity embody a vision of rationality that is not the commodified rationality of capitalism. Pro-poor and pro-women, it is rooted in a vision of social justice and equality for all humans.

It is encouraging to see signs of current Odia criticism's engagement with Fakir Mohan's great novel on terms set out above. At least this would seem to be the case in the recent article on the novel titled "Abhisapta Kohinoor" that Mr. Das has published in *Sambad*, and, which this presentation alluded to in the beginning. In the following passage is the heart of his analysis in English translation.

To put it another way, the art of Fakir Mohan consists not in telling but in showing. Every chapter is a tableaux. A series of vignettes which are the fit ingredients for the construction of an epic saga. This grand recit of Odia letters will remain and explain, because it is not the grand recit of Westerners. This grand recit is not the story of the triumph of civilization; it is about the blossoming of ordinariness, an impartial battleground for the triumphs and tragedies of the ordinary mortals. Everyone here is engaged in life's struggle. The grand text of Odia literary ethos originates from here. Herein is displayed the anecdotality of Odia language, its logicity, lucidity and precision.

Das ends this impressive passage with that unfortunate lamentation: "Will a critique on the fictional art of *Chhamana Athaguntha* that is of international calibre never ever see the light of day?" The foregoing presentation will hopefully convince the potential reader of the essay otherwise. The effort to bring the CML volume into Odia discourse through an impressive translational undertaking, spearheaded by Dipti R. Pattanaik and Saroj Ranjan Mohanty, must be cited as another crucial example of this convergence. Anyway, without wanting to take anything away from Das's splendid presentation of *Chhamana Athaguntha* I would like to end by happily noting the welcome convergence between what the recent critical discourses in English and Odia on the novel have achieved. The meaning of the achievement is this: Fakir Mohan's fiction should not simply be revisited in light of trends in world criticism. That shows a colonial mindset. His fiction has the resources for redefining the trends in world criticism.

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