

RESISTANCE IN THE POSTCOLONIAL HINDI LITERARY FIELD: MOHAN DĀS BY UDAY PRAKĀŚ

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Abstract

This paper reads Uday Prakāś's Mohan Dās as a multi-layered story of resistance. From the thematic point of view, it is a story of marginality, featuring a young Dalit resisting the oppression of the hegemonic society. It is also a story of multiple identities – or of a total loss of identity. The text resists gender categorisation. There is continuous meta-textual play: Mohan Dās reminds us of the historical Mahatma Gandhi not only through his name, but also concerning his ideas and actions. Other fictional characters in Mohan Dās obviously refer to the Hindi literary field, like Gajānan Mādhav Muktibodh and Śamśer Bahādur Siṃh. As Mohan Dās was first published in the literary magazine *Haṃs* in the Premchand anniversary issue, and Uday Prakāś often refers to Hindi authors of the past in his works, it is possible to analyse the text as calling for an alternative canon in Hindi literature, one that resists the mainstream. Mohan Dās can be seen as an example of postmodern Hindi literature in which the focus is not on the urban middle class, but on the rural and subaltern India.

Keywords: Hindi literature, postmodern, postcolonial, Dalit identity, globalization, Uday Prakash

In this article I focus on a story by Uday Prakāś, Mohan Dās, to analyse some aspects that show resistance to the mainstream, both from the formal point of view and in terms of the content. I argue that Uday Prakāś's literary resistance is meant as taking a political stand: the committed intellectual is ascribed the role of speaking truth in a world oriented around the triumph of untruthfulness.

A COUNTER-NARRATIVE ON DALITISM: MOHAN DĀS, GANDHI, AND AMBEDKAR

Uday Prakāś's Mohan Dās can be read as a multi-layered story of resistance, focussing on two aspects: from the thematic point of view, it is a story of marginality, featuring a young dalit resisting the oppression of the hegemonic society. The protagonist's identity is stolen by an unscrupulous Brahmin character as part of a deep-rooted conspiracy involving the whole community, and this launches his heroic struggle. The second aspect is formal.

Mohan Dās resists gender categorization – it is a long short story, or a very short novel, exhibits continuous meta-textual play, and can be read as a critique of the Hindi literary canon.

Uday Prakāś creates the story of a dalit hero who shows a clear resemblance with Gandhi, thus constructing a literary character that is a sort of postcolonial version of Gandhi. This is a daring act, considering the famous contraposition between Gandhi and Ambedkar. But it also goes against the current because it is a choice that opposes the prevalent discourse in dalit policy, based on Ambedkar and his iconography of dalit emancipation. This dalit avatār of Gandhi finds himself again and again in a helpless situation, yet not even a single Gandhian activist or organization is made available in the story to help him. Even while expressing a deep sympathy for Gandhian thought, the text makes no allowance for any sympathetic argument about whatever is left of the Gandhian project in the contemporary world.

The oppression of dalits has been going on for ages, but Mohan Dās's story is the product of a distinct modernity (or postmodernity?). In fact, the story also portrays a political and social change affecting contemporary Hindu society. In a rural and semi-urban setting, a young Brahmin usurps a constitutionally mediated scheduled caste identity, reserved for ex-untouchables, and while doing so neither he nor his family show any hesitation out of fear of ritualistic pollution. How can such a change take place in the midst of the hindutva discourse? One possible answer is that the secular-bureaucratic structure of this constitutional identity is sufficient to guarantee them safety. The relation between this character and other upper-caste characters is founded on a shared middle-class identity, giving the fake Mohan Dās, who in any case is not made outcaste and maintains his birādārī links, a sort of “neo-Brahmin” status. Significantly, this is not perceived as a threat by the uppercaste characters.

POSTCOLONIALISM? POSTMODERNISM ?

I will try to analyse Mohan Dās, a brilliant piece of the literary imagination written in an experimental style with a deceptively simple narrative, as an example of postcolonial and/or postmodern Hindi literature, while problematizing the use of these labels. The text focuses not on the urban middle class, but on the rural and subaltern India. This is part of the globalised world, even if it seems to be totally aloof: the narrator's interventions emphasise the contemporaneity of events that seem to happen in a parallel world, creating a stylistic rupture. It is also a story of multiple identities — or of a total loss of identity — that has already had multiple avatārs, with an inter-media translation in the form a cinematic version.¹

The label “postmodern” poses the issue of the pertinence of using a Western epistemological tool in order to analyse a text like Mohan Dās. Very often the terms postmodern and postcolonial have been used as synonyms; therefore it is necessary to briefly discuss the validity of this equivalence. Western critics often use this equivalence in order to include in the category of “postmodern” writers originally from former colonies, so that the field of postmodern critique gains prestige. On the contrary, critics from former colonies prefer to distinguish between these categories: they emphasise that the “post” in postcolonial is not to be meant in a temporal sense, but rather denotes a reaction to “colonial” (in this sense, “post-colonial” could be meant as “anti-colonial”). Some western critics claim that society after the collapse of empires is both postmodern and postcolonial. Yet, the end of empires did not mark the end of colonialism; on the contrary, we can see that today a form of neo-colonialism is alive and kicking, with its own forms of economic and cultural exploitation.

At least three characteristics that can be traced in Mohan Dās are shared by both postmodern and postcolonial novels, and serve as the grounds for the claim that the postcolonial can be considered in some way a branch of the postmodern:

- the interest in meta-narration, the narration of stories about writers, musing on the act of writing
- the rethinking of history, with the production of an alternative history, written from the point of view of those who are generally excluded from historiographic texts: marginal people, the defeated, the formerly colonized, proletarians, women, the “others”
- re-writing famous works of the literary canons.

But there is a major difference. In the Western postmodern production there is a triumph of chaos, randomness, and nothing follows logical links; nevertheless, the story is narrated in a strongly mimetic way, so that its results are credible to the audience. Writers from the former colonies also focus on writing and the writing character, with an urgency typical of the theme of the struggle with time. But in the characters/writers of Anglo-Saxon postmodern novels writing is an individual act: it is an action necessary for the individual in order to survive the metropolis. On the contrary, in postcolonial texts, narration generally has a collective dimension; even when the narrator is an individual, his or her stories are at the same time both an individual’s autobiography and the lives of hundreds of people at the same level as the individual narration. This is a difference between the concepts postcolonial and postmodern that makes it impossible to equate them. The postmodern Anglo-Saxon cultural sphere imagines a totally disembodied world, but the “indigenous” imagination is physical, fleshy, and embodied. The literature of colonised/ex-colonised is born of an act of cannibalism: reality is expressed after having been interiorised and digested, and the writer is not a ghost, but rather his/her narrative

urgency stems from his/her having swallowed everything. Nothing happens by chance and reality does not exclude imagination, fantasy, and magic, and there is a total refusal of the mimetic mode. In this literary production there is an abundance of unreliable narrators who blatantly omit, forget, or give wrong information about time and space, modify events, and yet still want to be trusted, even when it is possible to prove rationally and objectively that they are wrong.

According to some critics, the postmodern and postcolonial re-writing of history can be labelled with the common definition of “historiographic metafiction”. But many Western postmodern novels are characterised by an investigation of the crisis of historicity that results in the impossibility to know, interpret, re-conquer history. At most there is personal history, random and fragmentary reality irrupting into an individual’s life, that is always and only *hic et nunc*, a present devoid of a temporal dimension. The discourse focuses on the end of the ability to knowing, on ‘terminality’, on the end of history, on amnesia; the collective and social dimension is absent, there is no memory, and everything focuses on the relations between subjectivity, history, and personal history.

On the contrary, much postcolonial fiction shows that getting back one’s own history does not lead to the recreation of a past that cannot be taken back, but rather is the search for a sense of belonging, the possibility to be part of a community or a group, of being there. History becomes a collective dynamic, and this is well shown by diaspora writers. The idea of re-appropriating one’s own past through a normative use of imagination and fantasy is shown to be naive. Notwithstanding the difficulty of maintaining faith in historicity and the sense of deep crisis, many postcolonial writers have confidence in the idea that the crisis can be overcome, thanks to an inner imaginative power, the capacity to keep on nurturing dreams: dreams of revolution or rebirth, that in any case are opposed to the notion of the end of history.

In the text there is a complex articulation of past, present, and future, and of the sense of history. First of all there is continuous reference to the present world, which is emphasized by the writer/narrator’s parenthetical interventions; these inserts remind the reader that the story being narrated does not belong to the past, is not referred to “once upon a time”, but rather to this present world. Even if the characters have lifestyles and life standards that date back at least 150 years, and even if the hierarchical relations have not changed in a century and a half, these human beings are acting in the contemporary world. This is indicated through constant reference to current events and news.

The emphasis on the sense of belonging is achieved in a negative way: the narration stresses the exclusion of dalits from the national project. The characters belong to non-scheduled castes and tribes, to minority religious groups; they are listed as *ādivāsī*, and have no political or economic power. There is a sense of community belonging, but it does

not act as a strong identification marker. Individuals belonging to these groups do feel empathy towards each other and share a community life, but their living conditions are so dire and troubled that there is no time for unselfishness and altruism: “Nobody had been able to get beyond their own troubles and sufferings. They were all people living this time silently, in sweat and tears”. The focus is on the extreme suffering that these individuals have to bear and on the de-humanizing effect of it, which is instrumental for the upper castes’ and politically organized groups’ maintenance of their privilege and power.

The link to a collective history is nevertheless very relevant, as each individual’s personal suffering reflects collective decisions on policy that remain out of his/her reach. Mohan Dās loses the fertile public soil that allowed him to get an extra income because of energy planning projects based on dam construction, land alienation, and permanent alteration of the ecosystem: land is flooded with water, flowing water becomes stagnant, and flora and fauna are destroyed.

From what is said above it is possible to claim that Mohan Dās does possess some characteristics of a postmodern story, but also other interesting traits that make the picture more complex. The notion of time in Mohan Dās is evidence of a South Asian modality of thinking about time as a spiral-like process. The conclusion, in fact, confers a mythical dimension to the story of Mohan Dās, who appears to be the contemporary manifestation of Eklavya, evoking the myth of the deluge as well. This is shown by the final reference to an archer who keeps on firing his arrows until he drowns, even when he knows there is no way out, even when no hope is left. This actor is named Rāghav, as if signalling a new dalit/ ādivāsī re-enactment of Rām’s epic. These characters are committed to truth, as Gandhi was. Thus the story is projected into a cosmic dimension much wider than history. Satyagraha may be defeated on an empirical level, but it maintains its strength on a cosmic one. The same narrative strategy is used in the above-mentioned short stories Pāl Gomrā kā skūṭar and Vāren Hestings kā sāmṛ, where events happened in the past are brought up to date, thus showing their universal dimension: individual characters may disappear, die, or be defeated, but the meaning of their struggle, as well as the collective or cosmic value of acts of rebellion inspired by a sense of justice and truth, remain and reappear from age to age.

META-TEXTUAL PLAY

In Mohan Dās there is continuous meta-textual play, which is explicitly stated by the narrator/writer himself. The character of Mohan Dās carries markers of personal identity that exhibit a clear resemblance with Gandhi. He lives in Purabnarā, a name reminding us of Porbandar. His father, Kābā Dās, echoes Karamcand Gāṃdhī, the Mahatma’s father, whose second name was Kābā; also Mohan Dās’s mother’s name, Putlī Bāī, is the same as Gandhi’s mother’s; Kastūrī Bāī is, of course, a reminder of Kastūrbā, the Mahatma’s wife.

Also, his ideas and actions mirror the story of the Mahatma, with him persisting in his search for truth and never resorting to violence. Gandhi fought injustice in Porbandar, Kāṭhiyāvār, Rājkoṭ and abroad, in South Africa, or else at Bajāj-Bīrlā Bhavan; now it seems he was born in Chattīsgarh and into the distress of heat and hunger, illness and sweat, insult and injustice – in the fields and the wastelands, the ditches and the caves, and the forests of the Vindhya region. The narrator is a male “I” who intervenes, creating a stylistic rupture as he writes in parentheses and italics, thus also marking his interludes typographically. In his first intervention he directly addresses the audience, requesting to be trusted, while emphasizing that this is not a symbolic narration, nor an allegory, or a fictional narration; he defines it as a plain story. But, he adds, to tell the truth it is not even a story, because it is a picture of the real world behind the veil of fiction. The characters are real individuals. Mohan Dās is defined as *asliyat*; one can find him in any Indian village. The exergo assures the readers that this is a true story, as Vijendra Sonī is the name of the lawyer who in 1996 brought the curious case of “Shobhalal versus Shobhalal” before the Anuppur court.

Another meta-textual level is the reference to Premchand. Mohan Dās was first published in Hams in the Premchand anniversary issue and there is an explicit reference to this event as well as to the fact that the lifestyle of the main characters clearly resembles that of Premchand’s *kisāns*, characters in stories of the past. But the narrator emphasizes that the story’s *śailī*, *śilp*, and *bhāṣā* are typical of the post 9/11 globalised world. Therefore there is continuous play with the notion of a layered ‘real’.

I think it is possible to call all this postmodern, without excluding the possibility of interpreting Uday Prakāś using a more grounded South Asian vocabulary. On the other hand, if we assume the point of view that Uday Prakāś himself proposes and consider the world we live in as highly networked, branding things Western and Eastern does not seem to be very useful or wise.

AN ALTERNATIVE CANON

The final point I would like to make concerns the issue of Hindi and the Hindi canon. The hero’s helpers in Mohan Dās are three great figures of Hindi literature from the recent past that Uday Prakāś imaginatively recalls. Uday Prakāś has very harsh words for the official Hindi language and for mainstream Hindi literature, not only in this long short story, but also in other works. It is a feature of his writing to make frequent reference to Hindi authors of the past; therefore it is possible to analyse the text as calling for an alternative canon in Hindi literature, resisting the mainstream.

Pīlī chatrīvālī laṛkī is more directly connected to the discussion of Hindi language and literature, as the setting of the story is a Hindi university department. The protagonist, an

educated dalit boy decides to study Hindi literature in order to follow his heart, and finds himself in a cultural environment where international literature is unknown, Arundhati Roy is considered a top model, and Hindi literature is not connected to names as Nirmal Varmā, Alkā Sarāvgī, and Vinod Kumār Śukla, but restricted to a 'classical feudalism' recognizing only Medieval and rīti literature. In the academic organization, jobs are divided between the Left and the Right, and as for Hindi university departments and governmental institutions, they are full of brokers, compromisers, petty people using the system for personal gain.

The protagonist, whose name resembles that of Rāhul Sāṃkrtyāyan studies the prescribed reading list, incidentally noticing that three out of three authors are Brahmans. And he cannot help stressing the fact that the textbook in use is Rāmcandra Śukla's History of Hindi literature, first published in 1929! He comments that studying Hindi is like travelling in a time machine: the present is simply cut off. Rāhul, though, has a different approach to literature: he mentions Lorca, Jan Otčenášek, Nirālā, and Śamśer Bahādur Siṃh. And he appreciates the classic works of the Hindi canon not as a mark of pride in an ancient civilization, but always as referring to his current experience. For example, he reads Hazārī Prasād Dvivedī's classic novel Anāmdās kā pothā as the Bildungsroman of a young man, finding in it a mirror of his own feelings and experiences. Love is a strong vehicle of self-fulfilment and of achieving a meaningful life, as individuals think, co-relate, and exist only through the relations they form with each other. The novel's hero is a young sage who passes through diverse experiences and experiments led by his insatiable desire for knowledge, and who is transformed from a self-indulgent sage into a responsible social being, sensitive to the truth of human existence around him.

Another poet referred to frequently by Uday Prakāś is Nirāla. In Pīlī chatrīvālī laṛkī there is a reference to the poem Rām kī śakti pūjā, in particular to some verses that seem to hint at the poet's desperate existential condition.

A curse on this life that's brought me nothing but frustration!

A curse on this discipline for which I've sacrificed!

Janaki! Beloved, alas, I could not rescue you!

But Rama's spirit, tireless, was of another sort...

that knew not meekness, knew not how to beg... (Rubin 2005: 49) [...]

And Ravana, Ravana, vile wretch, committing atrocities (Rubin 2005: 45)

This hero's attitude is the same as the one we find in Mohan Dās's concluding sketch, where a thirty-year-old Rāghav is shown continuing his fight even when he knows he will never win.

Other characters' names hint at the literary field: Mohan Dās's son Devdās obviously refers to Śaratcandra's masterpiece; advocate Sonī's first name is Harṣavarddhana, recalling the Hindū ruler who was a patron of literature and Buddhism. His court poet was Bāṇabhaṭṭa, the creator of Harṣacarita and Kādambarī, credited as being one of the primary historical sources for the period and as one of the first novels ever written. Bāṇabhaṭṭa was a writer who defied all norms and established ways of writing poetry in his times, and had equal numbers of admirer and critics. Incidentally he is also the protagonist of Bāṇabhaṭṭa kī ātmakathā, the classic Hindi novel by Hazārī Prasād Dvivedī narrating how perilous was the life of a poet — an unconventional one — amidst the politics of the day, a life bound by the social customs and a desperate need to earn a livelihood, a thirst to create an audience for his work.

Uday Prakāś's canon is established in the margins of the mainstream canon, based on a firm non-conformism that centres on writers like Bertolt Brecht, Federico Garcia Lorca, Muktibodh, and Nirālā. Why should anyone break the set norms in any society, in any field? What does it mean to be a rebel writer, a protracted, relentless proof of satire and parody? Why be the underground of dominant literature, the starting point rather than the accomplished result? The answer coming from these texts is that literature is given the role of speaking truth in a world where everything seems oriented around the triumph of untruthfulness. In our contemporary world, philosophies and ideologies may have been overcome, but the urge for justice is eternal. Therefore civil society still maintains hope, against the apparently unstoppable overwhelming and overbearing power of market, capital, and politics. That is the reason why Muktibodh, a mix of Brecht and Kafka smoking bīṛīs, long dead from a brain haemorrhage, can become an empirical reality just before the final judgment. The character looking for justice is the Author — more precisely the anti-author versus the establishment author — that is the persona of Uday Prakāś himself. The man telling the truth in the contemporary world is not the wondering sage or the mystic, but the visionary, acidic, and sharp-witted committed writer.

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