

**BEYOND THE MARGIN: THE VOICE OF THE DALIT IN GOPINATH  
MOHANTY'S *HARIJANA***

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**Abstract**

The objective of this article is to analyse *Harijan*, a novel by Gopinath Mohanty with a view to finding out the grievous concern of the subalterns who have raised voice against the injustice and exploitation inflicted upon them by the higher class people in the society. This article will trace on the journey of the marginalised by conceptualising their psyche from the shadows of anonymity and obscurity to the centre of focus in the society. Gopinath Mohanty highlights on the predicament of the downtrodden people who are alienated from society, their hazardous journey towards the path of life, their struggle for survival etc. Mohanty's writings have aroused sympathy for the voiceless. He is a committed writer, a novelist with a purpose, his purpose being to focus attention on the pain, suffering and misery, of the poor and the underprivileged group. He has raised his voice against the rotten system of the society. The untouchables of *Harijana* raise their voice against the so called oppression inflicted upon them by the society.

**Key Words:** Injustice, Margin, Voice, Resistance, Oppression, Victim,

**Introduction**

Literature always sketches the vulnerability and struggle of subjugated human beings. Gopinath Mohanty has marked those issues with special attention in his works. *Harijana* is the first Odia prose epic of Gopinath set in Independent India. It is the story of class struggle, unending drudgery of dalits, the problems of exploitation, shattering the dreams of dalits, denial of freedom and equality for dalits. It is the developed version of *Paraja* dealing with the problem of city life. Here in this novel, Mohanty handles characters belonging to the untouchable community. He wants to show how these untouchables try to survive in the battle of life. Empowering them with utmost patience, Mohanty tries to show us that these dalits struggle to survive even if they express their anger and frustration. Though they feel hopeless, they don't lose hope. They struggle in search of a new life; life where there is no place of exploitation.

*Harijana* by Gopinath Mohanty is a novel that focuses on the predicament of the underprivileged as it narrates the miserable lives of scavengers who are the worst sufferers of the society. The satire is directed against the iniquitous injustice of Indian society which treats the poor scavengers as dirty dogs. By a very well worked out technique of dramatic irony and by juxtaposing the plight of untouchables in the novel, Gopinath Mohanty has exposed the social

realism in contemporary Hindu society. The depiction of social injustice to the untouchables in Hindu society has made the work most popular. The suppressed cry and self-experiences of injustice and atrocities experienced by dalits are strongly presented in this novel. Dalits in the society always lose their identities; suffer from isolation and a defeatist mentality. They are always subjected to disgrace, torture, inequality and poverty. *Harijana* deals with the theme of exploitation of the poor dalits who are the most neglected people of the society. In *Harijana* the annihilation of casteism is the most significant part of Gopinath's humanism. He interpretes casteism as a social crime against humanity because it has evil effects on human mind. The condescending attitude of the affluent towards the marginalised section of the society always hurt Mohanty. Mohanty has protested against the social dogmas that are responsible for the plight of untouchables in 'Harijan' through his characters. Several incidents of the novel explain this fact.

Mohanty's untouchable characters are the victims of society and their fate is determined by the heredity. They undergo a torturous journey in life. They are pitted against the vast and menacing proportions of sham, cruelty, cynicism and hypocrisy as impinged upon them by the social mores. Mohanty, the messiah of the downtrodden, the unwanted and unloved believes that the summum bonum of a human being is living a life with dignity. But this way of living has been denied to the lower castes and the outcastes –the lower dregs of humanity because of the repulsive attitude of the rich.

Gopinath Mohanty's *Harijana* is basically a tragic drama of the untouchables caught in the net of the age-old caste system. The whole novel is a series of graphic and moving scenes with the untouchable girl, Puni as the central focus. The central character Puni symbolizes the exploitation and oppression which has been the fate of untouchables in the society. Puni is an amoral victim of the society. She faces the curse of untouchability when she goes to buy tea for her mother. As she has no money, the shopkeeper scolds and refuses her to give tea of one paisa. At the tea shop, a man satirizes her for buying tea. The man swears at her in the foulest manner because he fears the girl would pollute him. He castigates her for not having stayed to a side and not announcing her approach. She returns to the vicious attack. She is utterly stunned by the sudden and venomous outpouring of abuse. Mohanty in a moving passage of the novel describes:

Someone shouted, "O Lass! Where are you entering like kitten? Don't touch any one. Remain aside." The face of the crowd turned to her and remained as usual. Among the crowd she was shouting, 'Let me have tea of one paisa, tea of one paisa. I have had my rice pot on fire'. Someone else commented, "How habituated with tea this girl is!" (13)

The self of Puni, the untouchable, undergoes harrowing experiences. Humiliation after humiliation hurts her into recognition of her plight. Someone can not become low even if he/she takes birth in a low caste. Our society makes such distinction of giving high and low status to the people. The high caste people always exploit the low caste people who are victim of circumstances. More over the economic insecurity of the underprivileged section of society compel these people to surrender their selves before the privileged group.

In this novel Mohanty has exposed the hypocrisy of the cleaning supervisor who strictly follows caste rules before the society but on the other hand shows his generosity to a Dalit girl. Puni becomes the object of the supervisor's lust. Being a Dalit, she becomes the first recipient of the man's generosity as she seems to satisfy his waves of amorousness. He is motivated by the

evil intention. So he suggests Puni to join in work and get money. Caste identity and poverty are two main reasons for dalit's plights. Puni thinks over her sad plight and dreams to enjoy the life of privileged like Manamayee and Aghore. Looking at the big house of Abinash babu, she hopes to get all the luxuries of life as enjoyed by the high caste people. Her own degradable status often makes her sad. Her mother, Jema too is a victim of society. Jema in the novel receives a volley of abuses for not going to work as she falls ill. The cleaning supervisor has threatened her to cut her salary. She recognises her position as a mere latrine cleaner who has to bear the wrath of her superiors. Being exhausted with the cruel, inhumane and humiliating treatment of the man, she gathers courage to retaliate. Mohanty hints at the rebellious element in the novel when Jema says: "Jema is shouting, "Oh babu! Why are you getting angry? You can cut short money if no work. Why are you boasting in our house? Don't you see my condition? Who is there to help me do my work?" (35) The sweepers should be respected because they do very essential work of cleaning the city. But what an irony. Society pays no credit to their devotion to duty. The caste Hindus always treat them like dogs. In a caste-ridden society, the life of a dalit is a grim struggle. Upper caste men take advantages of women's poor economic conditions and attempt to physically assault them. If they resist, they are immediately thrown out of their jobs. That's why in *Harijana* Jema is threatened by the cleaning supervisor to go to work even if her body does not permit her to go. Accepting such social arrangements meekly, Jema decides to go to work. She also hopes to exchange her work with some other worker who will take over her work for some days. But no one agrees. She fears that if she fails to go to work, then they will die of starvation. The upper caste will not allow them to do so. They have to depend on the mercy of their superiors for morsel of food. Expressing her anger, Jema utters:

After an interval, Jema again said, "Will they leave us? Will they offer food without any work? What shall we do? We are poor people. We have neither strength nor support. If we want the menial job, being untouchable no one can allow us to move near them. If any job is there, it is very negligible. Much strain; but little money. Relying on fate, ours is the same work..... that we all do. What shall we do more?"(15)

Hearing such words from her mother, Puni too feels tormented. She can't bear the pain of her mother. Then Puni, comes forward to do this menial job for the sake of her mother. Instead of her mother's refusal, she decides to go to work like her other friends namely Ranga, Tabha, Kalamanika etc. The first day of her going to work is one of her memorable days. She feels helpless for her miserable situation. Taking basket full of dirt on waist covered with khali leaves, she walks. Kneeling down behind the latrine she does this dexterous work. Mohanty has beautifully explained the inner voice of Puni in his lines:

It is getting tough to restrict herself from puking, somehow managing to control that forcefully. Puni walked on, resting the basket of faeces on her waist, and looking down. She was occupied with the thought of why all this happened to her. Why did she rush out of the home so anxiously? Isn't there any other task in this big world to make a living? Who is she and what is she carrying? And to where? She is visibly broken and is cursing her fate. She must carry this dirt basket and walk with hanging head to earn a living – perhaps that is the plan of the Almighty (44).

The waste products of the body are unclean; therefore those who carry them are dirty and obnoxious. That's why the people of Nakdharapur village are considered as untouchable for they

do the menial jobs like scavenging. Puni suffers because of her filthy profession. She has no other way to earn her living. She shows her resistance against Aghore. She expresses:

Life is burning. Son of the rich man! Let him stay at his house. What a blackish work of cleaning human waste from others' latrines everyday at dawn! Bending oneself down for this purpose. There is no credit of doing this. The society pays nothing but abhorrence and avoidance (109).

What Mohanty describes, is a growing sense of self in Puni when she says: "Again for the last time, should not he come again, to listen only one word- the last word – 'I am not untouchable; but you'. I am only poor and your look creates sin, if touch defiled" (218).

In the novel Gopinath Mohanty rebels through his characters. The role of Dhani Budha is very important in the novel as he is a revolutionary figure. Through Dhani Budha, Mohanty tries to resist against uppercaste people. The old man has tried to arouse the poor untouchables from age-old drudgery. He wants them to protest against from the bondage of slavery. As a revolutionary, he attempts to organise the masses into collective revolt. Dhani Budha continues his movement near the latrine, near drain, among crowd and in front of the small shops. He makes the poor untouchable rebellious against inhuman treatment, agony, atrocity and any kind of injustice caused to them. Mohanty's revolutionary character has raised his voice:

Dhani Budha gave a speech - They are cheating on you. This Kalki Avatar is not at all to destroy us. God in this incarnation will save us and destroy them all. Let them know this, this time. Who will clean the dirt when we are made to die? Who will take care of the corpses of the cattle after us? Who will do the odd jobs? The whole country will come to a standstill. We are dearer to God, we are sincere devotees. God puts the devotees into tough tests intentionally so that we will not be able to meditate on anything else other than Him (68).

This character motivates Sania and other young mass to raise voice against the upper caste men. The old man develops in them a spirit to assert their right to live with dignity. A good status can only be possible if they acquire money. He also encourages them to steal money from the house of the high caste people. Sania, being frustrated, robs at Abinash babu's house. After robbery, Sania feels very happy. He fulfils the demand of her childhood friend Puni whom he loves. A new kind of satisfaction fills his heart. But later in the story, he is arrested and severely beaten.

Gopinath Mohanty does not miss any opportunity to castigate social injustice rampant in the society. Sania wants to be treated as a human being. In spite of his hard work, he is insulted and put beyond the possibility of proper recognition. These also cause excruciating pain to him. Sania, a poor scavenger strives for dignity. He seeks to be respected by people around him. But the cruel society treats him like cats and dogs of society. He is discriminated on account of various factors. Long suppressed into submission and silence, Sania finally emerges out of the shadows of subjugation. He mobilises resistance against his superior. The defiant consciousness or the signs of rebellion have germinated in Sania when he openly denies the cleaning supervisor not to go to work. He quarrels with the man when the later hurls abuses at Sania. He suffers humiliation and has raised his voice against the man. Being helpless, he follows other ways to survive. He follows the path of robbery. He steals money and jewellery from Abinash Babu's house and feels very happy because his condition is changed. He is able to present gifts to his Puni. But then he is caught; mercilessly beaten, abused, insulted and humiliated by caste Hindus.

Deeply bruised and anguished, Sania ponders over his ignoble condition. Sania's stunning realization of his untouchability is beautifully described by Gopinath Mohanty in his lines: "Sania's plea and request became feeble. He said, "Kill as much as you like". We are poor untouchable scavengers. Who will support us! It is your kingdom, go on killing us" (187). The mental depression of all untouchables finds its expression in Sania's plight in the novel.

Since the untouchables do not have any option other than doing menial jobs, they have to entirely depend on the upper caste for their survival. And that is exactly happened in the case of Sania. Sania is, in fact, searching for some other works which will both fetch him status and money. While requesting the high caste contractor to provide him some work, he is spurned and driven out insulted. Then he turns into an incipient rebel and ultimately, in his quest for identity becomes an articulate thinking individual. In his case, his self-conception rests on the marginality of the society he lives in. The battle between the marginal self and dominant society continue to exist. Sania's voice is heard in the following lines:

By the time he reached home, his anger had boiled down to his self-worth. Isn't there any other way to earn a living? He is able, energetic and young. There is so much work in this big city. What has the Almighty conspired against him leaving his body suitable only to clean faeces and not fit for anything else? (83)

Gopinath Mohanty's novel *Harijana* is based on the pain, agony and difficulties that Dalit men and women have to go through in their every day life and the way they overcome such life-situations. Mohanty explores on the pathetic plight of the dalits who sometimes endeavour to rise up in the social scale. When they do so, the next moment they are brutally crushed by the upper castes. Several oppressive social forces bring a state of helplessness for the dalits. They suffer from an identity crisis apart from being discriminated from for their low social order. Sometimes they have to go through tensions which grow out of a continuous battle between "loss of identity and asserting of self". Through out the novel Puni and Sania experience a state of helplessness because of their caste identity. This is a sign of resistance. Sania's fate is determined by his caste identity. His untouchable caste identity is his big disadvantage. In his childhood he was thrown out from school just because he happened to come from supposedly polluted community called scavenger. He did not fulfil the wish of his grand mother as the upper caste teacher practised untouchability in school. Hence he was denied entry inside the classroom and allowed to sit outside the verandah. His fellow classmates showed disrespect towards him. He also wiped the faeces of the uppercaste students. He learnt no alphabets. Gopinath has highlighted how the lower caste boys like Sania is compelled to discontinue his education. He also demonstrates the hostility of school environment where the dalit children are discouraged to attend classes.

Mohanty scathingly attacks the hypocrisy of the uppercaste men who in the day time practise untouchability but at night sleep with the untouchable women without any shame or guilt. Characters like Abinash Babu and his son Aghore play with the sentiments of the low caste women. Abinash babu does false promises to both Jema and Jashoda. Jema's dignity is questioned when she gives birth to Puni. But Abinash Babu never takes the responsibility of upbringing the poor girl by giving his own name. Jema has to look after the child. In spite of her poverty, she tries to dissociate Puni from doing the menial job. She dreams of her daughter's marriage. For Puni, she goes to market and brings dry fish even if she has no money. She feels so happy in giving Puni the dish of cabbage and for this she has sustained injury and shed blood. While stealing cabbage from Bishi Babu's garden, Jema is caught and severely beaten. After that

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she suffers from illness because of high fever. Jashoda is also used by Abinash Babu when she loses her husband and in-laws in her past. Abinash babu promises to give her a secured life having all the luxuries. Jashoda dreams to get a dignified status both in his heart and house. But no such things happened. She is left with her unfulfilled desire. She is forcibly stayed there and plays the role of a domestic help. Being frustrated and hopeless, Jashoda expresses her resentment. She becomes violent and raised her voice against Abinash Babu. Gopinath presents the inner conflicts of Jashoda's agitated mind. Her resistance is shown in the novel when she disfigures the red bud of rose plant only to rebel against the higher class. Struck by poverty, Jashoda has no other way out to escape from her cruel fate. She has to surrender herself before the high class. But continuous torture at Abinash Babu's home makes her violent at one point of time in the novel. She has raised her voice. Mohanty writes:

The voice reached its high pitch. Suddenly interruption came from slow but rude throat "Whoose face will you break lady lord? Her face was covered with untidy locks, body covered with dirty cloth, like the cover of darkness. Holding the broom tightly, Yashoda came closer with a frowning face and said, "I am not living under your feudal jurisdiction" (142).

Gopinath condemns the hypocrisy of Indian upper caste men who for their own convenience follow caste rules but would never mind indulging in carnal pleasure by exploiting the dignity of the lower caste women. Similarly Aghore does not feel shy by making illicit affairs with his step-sister, Puni.

*Harijana*, a unique novel, is a majestic triumph of theme. From the viewpoint of theme, it can be assessed as a social and proletarian novel. Mohanty has beautifully described the lives of the outcastes, the lowest stratum of Indian society who suffers extreme economic and physical deprivation. He also paints a startling picture of the conditions in which these people live. Though the novel *Harijana* is based on the problems pertaining to the theme of caste, still the writer puts emphasis on the class distinction of the society. The world of Mohanty is the world of haves and havenot. By employing the image of 'fire' in the novel, the novelist shows the forms of class distinction. The poor dalits are destined to live from hand to mouth and to be shooed away from better vicinities. Towards the end of the novel, people like Abinash Babu, his wife, and daughter dream to render the poor sweeper class of Nakdharapur homeless. The ruthless family of Abinash Babu never show their sympathy to these poor sweepers. In other words, they set fire in their slum in the late hour of the dark night, thus rendering them homeless. In connection with *Harijana*, Kartikeswara Sahoo quotes: "*Harijana* is the story of poor, helpless and exploited groups. The theme centres round basic denial of happiness, help and opportunity. Money controls destiny and prosperity. Economic and social exploitation in society focuses on the realistic aspect of life" (190).

Mohanty's aim in writing *Harijan* is to give voice to the emotions, experiences and feelings of the exploited untouchables. This novel is written to create awareness for the agonizing ordeal and misery of the poor scavengers who are not just exploited physically and economically but are deprived of the very basic rights of human beings to live with dignity and honour. Here in this novel, he presents the dalits as victims of the historical process but at the same time as agents of reversing the victim's role by showing resistance towards the upper caste people. Puni, Jema and Sania though downtrodden, all of them throw a challenge to the orthodox and established practices. Though they struggle but they do not lose hope. In the discussed novel,

the Kuchha houses of the sweeper slum in Nakdharapur catch fire. And this is done deliberately by Mr. Abinash. The high storeyed buildings of the rich people have been built up on the poor people's land. By humiliating and harassing the poor, he becomes very happy. After vacating the slum people of Nakdharapur, he arranges a prayer of God in the newly constructed temple. But then this is not the end. Though they vacate the land by the pressure of high caste men, still they hope to live a new life. They are not escapists. They are real immortalists, who in spite of going through the ups and downs of life have forgotten all their difficulties and try to see dream of a new sunrise. For them the morning golden sun has risen with a lot of new desires and aspirations. The new risen sun has given them strength to face the ordeals with patience so that they can move forward. Sitakanta Mohapatra writes:

The revolt of the exploited becomes not merely a fight for social justice against another social class; it also become part of a universal endeavour of man to free himself from the tyranny of fate, the endeavour to understand the ineluctable laws of change, and to come to a control of his destiny. This is perhaps because of author's great intimacy with the concrete situations he is handling (83-86).

Regarding Mohanty's style of writing novel, Pattnaik says: "Gopinath Mohanty's novels have a unique style comprising of lyrical intensity and lucidity as well as a variety of linguistic resources and rhetorical devices" (75). In the words of Mayadhar Mansingh: "Mohanty's works have the appearance of wilderness. They seldom make happy reading. Mohanty has never trained himself to stop where he should, but goes on and on till he tires the most patient reader" (256).

To conclude, I must say that hope to live and survive is an important aspect of dalit literature and that is what Mohanty proves in this novel. Life is a continuous struggle. The struggle to survive among the high caste people is a matter of challenge for the poor dalits. These subjugated people have to undertake one fight more: a fight to affirm and assert their identity in the mainstream of the society. Mohanty puts emphasis on the dignity of the marginalised people who struggle so hard to survive at some human level. His compassionate insight in to the psyche imparts force to all the characters in their search for dignity. Though they undergo various adverse situations, still they do not loose hope. Though, they float in the boat of tragedy, they do not lose hope. Hence, Mohanty's discussed novel *Harijana* brings out the dalit spirit; the human spirit of endurance and courage at its core.

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