

# Reconstructing Fakirmohan Senapati as a Bakhtinian Novelist

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## Abstract

This paper aims to highlight the shift in paradigm in the criticisms written on Fakirmohan Senapati. Taking Senapati's literary masterpiece *Six Acres and a Third* (2005) (Originally published as *Chhamana Athhaguntha* 1896-98) as the centre of focus it analyses how it has been looked at from different perspectives by various critics at different points of time in history. Starting its journey as a moralist and social reformist novel, how the novel has undergone transformation into a post-modernist and post-colonial fiction through shift in critical attention is examined here. It will also try to correlate how this has contributed to Senapati's journey from a regional writer to a world author.

**Keywords-** *Post-modernist novel, Bakhtinian Novel, World-author, realist, Post-colonialism.*

## INTRODUCTION

Fakirmohan Senapati is known to his readers as the architect of the modern Odia fiction. In spite of his unmatched literary ability and mastery over a sophisticated narrative technique he has not been able to find a place in the league of writers (such as Marquez and Rushdie) to which he actually belongs. In the introduction written to *Six Acres and a Third* (2005), the English translation of Senapati's Magnum Opus -*Chhamama Athhaguntha* (1896-98), Satya P Mohanty states

"Both the naturalist realism that builds on the accumulation of details and the analytical realism ..... are achieved in Senapati's novel through a self-reflexive and even self-parodic mode, one that reminds us more of the literary post-modernism of a Salman Rushdie than the naturalistic mode of a Mulk Raj Anand." (Senapati and Mishra, 2005)

Mohanty wishes to convey the idea that a novelist writing in the 19th Century was able to practice the narrative techniques that are celebrated in the present masters of the genre. However, these qualities of Senapati were not common knowledge among academics before the 21st century. The main reason for that was the lack of a critical tradition in Odisha which could have propelled him to the pedestal of a figure of world literature which he certainly deserved.

In order to understand the importance of a critical tradition let's look at this observation from famous American critic Jonathon Culler. Culler points out, "Earlier history of criticism was part of history of literature. Now criticism provides the framework for understanding literature." The crux of Culler's point is that in present times the understanding and reception of a text depends largely on the amount and variety of critical attention it has received.

Hence, in spite of having immense literary merit, a text could escape the eyes of the readers around the world just because there is not enough critical analysis available for placing a text in a tradition or movement or simply highlighting its literary merit.

It can now be safely said that a text constantly evolves through the intervention and application of new critical and literary theories. With this the image of a writer also undergoes a transformation as it is timely again constructed and reconstructed by criticism. In other words the transformation in the way an author is perceived is the product of the well informed scrutiny that his text receives from critics who are armed with the knowledge of the evolving critical tradition of literature and applies the tools of that tradition to that author where applicable.

In this context the example of the great Victorian novelist Charles Dickens may be discussed. Dickens has been read as both serious and children's literature and these perceptions of his works have been the product of critical engagement with his texts. In a paper titled, 'Dickens Criticism' AOJ Cockshut tries to create a new image of Dickens by evaluating how he has been handled by critics both serious and the not so serious kinds. He is of the opinion that Dickens is "for the English middle class, much one of their articles of their creed - a familiar joke, a favourite dish, a Christmas ritual - that it is difficult for British pundits to see in him the great artist and social critic that he was".(Cockshut,1964) And then he goes on to present a case for the writer ascribing great importance to his works. But while doing so, he constantly draws the attention of the readers to the fact that how criticisms written on him have influenced the way he is perceived by the public. For him "Dickens is one of those immeasurable and complex facts that can be

approached in an indefinite number of different ways." (Cockshut,1964)

Another example of how criticism can significantly redefine the image of a writer is the case of Chinua Achebe. Chinua Achebe has been considered as a dominant anti-colonial voice from Africa. However, in a study conducted from a social science perspective, a researcher Merun Nasser suggested that Achebe's portrayal of African women is inauthentic as he has not been able to provide them the agency and subjectivity that they enjoy in real life. This affirmed the idea proposed by Fredrick Jameson (Jameson,1986) and Parth Chatterjee (Chatterjee,2020) that post-colonial literature, while creating a national allegory can be blind towards the exploitation happening within the nation. This will definitely paint a very different picture of Achebe as a writer. However, this image can further be revised if his last book titled *The Anthills of Savannah* (Achebe,1997) is studied closely which will unearth new ideas on how Achebe portrayed his female characters.

Fakirmohan Senapati has been the subject of such a significant change in image as a writer in the world stage.. His primary works were written in the regional Odia language and were extremely popular among readers who spoke Odia. In the 1960s when the English Academia in Odisha showed interest in his best known work *Chhamana Athhaguntha* (1896-98) after its translation into English first under the title *The Stubble under the cloven Hoof* (1967) and then as *Six Acres and a Half* (1967), the engagement with the text became vigorous which led to the rise of his fame outside Odisha. But it was only after the turn of the century that academics from both inside and outside India gave the text the theory mediated critical attention as a result of which he was started to be considered as a figure in world literature.

This transformation in the way he is perceived as an author is the product of the well informed scrutiny that his text received from critics who were armed with the knowledge of the contemporary theories of literature. By examining *Six Acres and a Third* (2005) through the lenses of contemporary critical theories, these critics have been able to prove that Senapati is a much more complex writer for his times. This paper intends to map the shift in critical paradigm in the critical essays written on Senapati and study its implications on the image of Senapati as a writer.

In the initial phase Senapati was perceived by critics as a moralist and social realist writer and it is these angles from which his fiction has been analysed. In order to understand how this book was originally intended to be perceived it would be apt to mention the publishers note that was written when the book was originally published as a book in 1902 by Utkal Sahitya Press after being serialized in its magazine Utkal Sahitya from 1897-99. The authors note goes as follows

"That there is a serious dearth of of readable and entertaining works of prose in Odia is a slander heard from many. On being questioned to this effect, we who are Odias have hung our heads in shame. The honorable author of *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is a famed and seasoned servant of the literature of Utkal. He has both ability and perseverance. And he is a past master in painting nice and delectable scenes in a simple and sweet language. His creation *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is a dazzling instance of this. If we have set our hearts on publishing this work, it is with this hope that it would go some way towards filling the void created by the absence of entertaining and readable works of prose in the literature of Utkal." ("A Narrative of Socialism and Satire")

Hence it is evident that the first readers of the book saw this as a text which is 'entertaining and readable' and that it could be a postmodernist or postcolonial text was an 'exotic and outlandish idea'. But with the passage of time the text has been construed into something of both and much more. In order to understand this in greater detail let's look at two essays by two critics from Odisha. The first one is by Baishnaba Charan Samal titled '*Chha Mana Atha Guntha o Godaan*' which was published in the year 2004 and the second one is by Himansu S Mohapatra titled '*Two classic Tales of Village India : The Realist Epistemology in Chha Mana Atha Guntha and Godaan*' which was published in the book *Colonialism, Modernity and Literature: A View from India*. (Mohanty,2012)

In the first essay, the writer lays out the emphasis on both the novels' take on morality and points out the similarities and differences both of these have while addressing this question. Let's look at this paragraph from Samal which has been translated into English for the benefit of the readers by the writer of this essay.

"In *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* fate, Karma, the unforeseen destiny and regret plays a very significant role. The sad end that one meets for acquiring wealth through unfair means is also highlighted. But *Godaan* has not put a great deal of importance on these. While in *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* the exploiters have got what they deserved, in *Godaan* we don't see that. *Godaan* is a realist novel and realism doesn't give much importance to fate and karma, it aims at accurately representing what is real and true." (Samal,2004)

The analysis of Samal is advanced from a moralist and social realist angle. He is looking at both the writers from a moralist perspective

and points out how it has been taken into consideration by Senapati while Premchand has favored the mimetic nature of realism over moral obligations. On the social realism front, Samal points out that the theme of exploitation is dealt with a lot of emphasis in *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* as compared to *Godaan*. It is clear that although the analysis is advanced from a realist perspective, it is oblivious of the complex theoretical framework that is used for realism of late.

On the other hand, Mohapatra takes the discussion to the next level by opening up the concept of realism with a discourse informed by the contemporary critical theories such as post-modernism. For example let's look at this sentence from the abstract of the above mentioned article by Mohapatra.

"Granted, the world comes to us in the shape of stories, but I wish to show how some stories write the world in a more realistic way than others precisely by providing a better epistemic access to it." (Mohanty,2012)

In this one sentence, Mohapatra not just underlines how there is a difference between the notion of realism as believed by Premchand and Senapati but while doing so, he brings the post-positivist philosopher Richard Boyd's ideas and its subsequent adaptation into literature by Satya P Mohanty into play. Thus the discussion of the two novel attains the complexity and sophistication that has become the adorned feature of criticisms written in contemporary times which in turn essays to put the texts it deals with in the league of the highly complex texts of our times.

This following excerpt from Mohapatra's essay will clinch the point.

"Senapati's novel provides referential refinement and "epistemic access" through its

self-reflexive narration that holds the mediating mythologies impinging on consciousness into scrutiny. Premchand's novel minimizes this interrogative aspect as it moves towards a fuller psychological portrayal." (Mohanty,2012)

Here Mohapatra also makes a distinction between the narrative technique of Premchand and Senapati. He holds the opinion that Premchand's portrayal of realism is to capture the psychological reality of the society whereas Senapati's portrayal of reality is to question and participate in the 'making and unmaking of facts' which is called as Interpretative realism by Satya P Mohanty. Although the two writers were exponents of realism in the context of early Indian novel, the realism as conceived by both is opposed to each other. The aim of realism as practised by Senapati, Mohapatra goes on to say, is to 'problematize the real so that the rules of the world can be rewritten'.

Hence, it is this paradigmatic shift that has created this new image of senapati which puts him in the league of writers like Achebe or Marquez. The newest in this developments is the reimagining of his *Six Acres and a Third* as a post-modernist novel. A postmodernist novel by definition is written in a style that is characterized by the use of metafiction, unreliable narration, self-reflexivity, intertextuality and which chooses political and historical issues as its theme. Senapati's adept use of these complex and sophisticated narrative techniques particularly in *Six Acres and a Third* has been analysed by critics in a volume titled *Colonialism, Modernity and Literature A View from India*. The essays written in this volume have approached the text through a discourse mediated by western literary theories which has unearthed the hidden potential of the text to be considered as an ahead of its time and post modernist novel.

Senapati's masterpiece *Chha Mana Atha Guntha* is undoubtedly narrated in a self reflexive style. In this text, he employs realism in a self conscious and self reflexive manner. His realism is very different from that of his contemporaries or predecessors as the realism portrayed in his late works is much more subtle and analytical. While the other realists of his time in Indian literature merely aim for a photographic representation of the life as lived by the Indian masses, Senapati's realism delves deeper by engaging with their socio-economic conditions and simultaneously showing and explaining their stories. The realism which he incorporates in his writing is interpretative, which means it doesn't just present a spectacle in front of the eyes of the readers but analyzes that spectacle and explains its various parts and their intricate relationships.

A comparison with *Bengal Peasants lives* by Lal Bihari Day will show how Senapati's take on realism is much more complex and nuanced than it was common in his times. As Satya P Mohanty states in his introduction to the translation of Senapati's celebrated book *Six Acres and a Third*, "much of Day's novel is written in this embarrassingly turgid style, where the main goal seems to be to convert the village women into specimens of this or that caste, this or that subregion of Bengal, so that the reader may be amused by the cultural details." (Senapati and Mishra, 2005) However Senapati, while presenting a similar episode as Day, takes the indirect route by presenting the whole scene through the mouth of a narrator who embellishes the account through his own insights. These insights from the narrator showcases the interpretative realism of which Senapati was an adept. In other words, Senapati's realism was self-reflexive in which he explored and explained simultaneously the lives of the working class people of his time. A

passage from Day's work and that of Senapati's is quoted for better illustration of the point.

A woman robbing her feet sees another woman preparing to go and says to her,

"Sister, why are you going away so soon? You have not to cook; why are you then going away so soon?"

"Sister, I have to cook today. The elder bou is not well today. She was taken ill last night."

"But you have not to cook much. You have no feast in your house?"

"No; no feast, certainly. But my sister has come from Devagrama with her son. And the fisherman has given us a large Rohita, which must be cooked."

"Oh! You have guests in your house. What are you going to cook?"

"I am going to cook dal of mashkalai, one tarkari, badi fried, fried fish, fish with pepper corns, fish with tamarinds, and another dish of which my sister's son is very fond, namely amda with poppy-seed."

"The everlasting badi and poppy-seed. You bania are very fond of these things. We Brahmans do not like either of them."

"The reason why you Brahmans do not like badis is because you do not know how to make them well. If you once taste our badi, you will not forget it for seven months. You would wish to eat it everyday. As for poppy-seed, what excellent curry it makes....though you are Brahman, once taste my badi. Badi will not destroy your caste."

So saying the banker woman went away with the kalasi in her waist. (Day, 1969)

Senapati's passage goes like this.

“The gathering at the ghat became very large when the women came to bathe before cooking their daytime meals. If there had been a daily newspaper in Gobindapur, its editor would have had no difficulty gathering stories for his paper; all he would have had to do was sit at the ghat, paper and pencil in hand. He would have found out, for instance, what had been cooked the previous night, at whose house, and what was going to be cooked there today; who went to sleep at what time; how many mosquitoes bit whom; who ran out of salt; who had borrowed oil from whom; how Rama’s mother’s younger daughter in law was a shrew, and how she talked back to her mother-in-law, although she married only the other day; when Kamali would go back to her in-laws; how Saraswati was a nice girl and her cooking was good, her manners excellent...” (Senapati and Mishra, 2005)

It is clearly evident that Senapati, while portraying the authentic life of his people, also goes deeper by giving his readers an insight of the workings of the society he is portraying. He doesn’t simply revel in showing the cultural diversity of Odisha village life, but, he goes an extra mile by engaging with the inner workings of their lives: showing and explaining how the social negotiations take place.

A reading of *Chha Mana Athha Guntha* will inform the readers of the techniques through which Senapati has been able to expose the social undercurrents without being outrageous. He employs irony to intimate to his readers the hidden social reality of the times. He also very humorously makes use of western dialectics to justify the vices of the men and social institutions. The garrulous narrator of the story becomes the bow through whom he shoots these seemingly benign arrows at the exploitative Indian and colonial masters. Let’s for example look at the passage from the chapter three of the book

“There were seventeen drumstick trees in the master’s orchard and their leaves possessed certain medicinal properties. They aided digestion, were nourishing and delicious; besides, they helped restore the sick to health. We do not know if books really claimed such properties for the leaves of the drumstick tree, but then we have no expertise in that field. We have merely written down what we have heard from Mangaraj himself. Naturally enough, not a single leaf found its way to the market; they were reserved exclusively for the well-being and nourishment of the farmhands. And the flowers of these trees constituted the most wholesome food in the world; when cooked with mustard, they were wonderful. In God’s creation good and bad are everywhere intertwined. Consider how a jackfruit is sweet and wholesome, while its fibers harm the stomach. People who are wise, however, can effortlessly sort the good from the bad. They know that everything that the drumstick tree produces is good, except, of course, the drumsticks themselves. Which is why Mangaraj never served those to the farmhands; they went straight to the market.” (Senapati and Mishra, 2005)

Here, Senapati exposes how cunningly Mangaraj deceives his innocent farmhands. Instead of directly showing or narrating the story, he lets his tongue-in-cheek narrator build up an excuse to justify Mangaraj’s exploitation of his subjects.

In a time when Senapati was writing it is very rare to find such self-conscious writing which makes him one of the most sophisticated writers of his times. Even though he lacked a developed writing tradition, the style and narrative techniques that he used puts him in a very select list of writers who deserve global acknowledgement. The self-reflexivity in his fiction is a proof of his complex and advanced

writing style which served as a headstart for sophisticated writing culture in Odia Literature.

In this connection, it would be apt to mention a new direction towards which the criticism of *Six Acres and a Third* is headed. This movement is pioneered by Satya P Mohanty who has introduced the idea of ‘view from below’ in the context of *Six Acres and a Third* in the preface to the 2005 translation of the book. This view from below implies Senapati in his text tried to reimagine the colonial Indian society from the perspective of the poor and down trodden. In order to explain this further Mohanty draws on an excerpt from the text . When the landlord of the village is replaced by another the villagers reminded each other of an old saying. It goes like this

“Hey there, horse, watch out or someone will steal you. What matter, replies the horse, wherever I go I’ll have the same fodder and water!” ( Senapati and Mishra, 2005)

The change of ownership does not mean anything for a horse because it doesn’t get much from the first owner and it will not get much from the next owner as well. Hence, it needs to look after its own interest. In his introduction Mohanty states that “Senapati’s novel is written from the perspective of the horse , the ordinary villager and the foot soldier, in other words, the labouring people of the world. Mohanty here applies the concept developed by Bakhtin in his essay “ Epic and Novel”. In this essay Bakhtin points out that while Epic and poetry come under the category of high literature i.e. the literature of the ruling class , “the novel has an unofficial existence outside high literature.” (Bakhtin, 2010) So while poetry and other forms of high literature presents a worldview which is official , the novel on the otherhand presents the worldview of the poor , uneducated and downtrodden

which differs greatly from the official world view. Senapati not only presents the unofficial world view through his characters and narrators, but also questions the official world view by the employment of Satire.

For example in Chapter 12 of *Six and a Third Acres* Senapati writes , “ Oh, you English educated babus, do not be too critical of our local historian Ekadusia Chandra. If you are, half of what Marshman and Tod have written will not survive the light of scrutiny .” (Senapati and Mishra, 2005)

In this paragraph , Senapati is questioning the legitimacy of what has been assumed as the official and genuine version of history. By doing this, he wanted to prove the point that even the purest documentation of facts which we call history is not free from fictionality. Hence, rejecting the non-european alternative histories on the grounds of non-accuracy would be unfair. In other words, senapati was arguing a case in favor of the non-official point of view or the point of view of common folks which Bakhtin envisaged the function of novel to be.

Another groundbreaking essay that is written on Senapati’s art of fiction is titled “ An Oriya Village and the Battle of Plassey: senapati’s Allegory of the Raj.” ( Sawyer, 2006) In this essay, Sawyer makes an analysis of how Senapati’s *Six Acres and a Third* is a text in which Senapati has brought the Bakhtinian idea of polyphony to life. In *Six Acres and a Third* although the language of the ordinary villager is used the insights offered by the text is far from ordinary. In fact, Senapati has been able to discuss and debate very complex philosophical issues using the words as used by the common village folk. Further, while discussing about the world view of the poverty-stricken and downtrodden people of society from their point of view, Senapati has not failed

to identify the exploitation and misery of the lower class and call it out.

Sawyer also throws light on the role played by the narrator in *Six Acres and a Third* and how he functions as a character in the novel rather than the persona of the writer. He explains how the narrator of *Six Acres and a Third* has persuaded the active reader of the novel to believe in the non-official narrative over the official narrative. The uniqueness of the narrator lies in the way he mediates between the higher and lower class discourse by blending his adept use of logical, legal, scientific and philosophical discourse with the world view of the uneducated and innocent villagers. So it is through this narrator that Senapati has been able to create a truly polyphonic novel that sympathises with the multiple perspectives on social reality.

Another concept of Bakhtin which we can find in abundance in *Six Acres and a Third* is dialogy. Dialogy means the novel does not subscribe to a singularity of consciousness. Rather it readily accepts the multiplicity of consciousness and considers its job to duly expose both with sincerity to its readers. The essence of dialogism lies on the condition of difference. In order to have a dialogue there has to be a difference between the two parties who communicate with each other. This difference lays the ground for the dialogue to take place inside the novel.

Hence, Bakhtin is of the opinion that all that has been written in the novel is a dialogue or in other words, a response of some kind. In the book *Six Acres and a Third* we find plenty of examples of dialogue. The narrator of the text narrates the story, yet the presence of a reader although silent, can be felt whose questions the narrator anticipates and answers. Thus the whole novel becomes a dialogue between the

narrator and the reader. Similarly, the cunning eloquence of Champa is contrasted with the silent innocence of the wife of Ramchandra Mangaraj. In the span of the text, Senapati finds a place for contrasting ideologies and gives representation to both. The garrulous narrator also plays a significant role in opening up a dialogue between the two ideologies revolving around east and west. The narrator, through his verbal antics, presents a comparative analysis of different ideas, world views and consciousness without presenting anything as the writer's own. Senapati presents his case in such a manner that one discourse, while presenting itself to the readers, tries to negate the other discourse by the subtle use of satire and parody.

In the first Chapter while introducing Mangaraj to the readers he goes on to say:

“He was a very pious man indeed: there are only twenty four ekadashis in a year; even if there had been forty such holy days, he would have observed every single one. This is indisputable. Every ekadashi he fasted, taking nothing but water and a few leaves of the sacred basil plant for the entire day. Just the other afternoon, though, Mangaraj's barber, Jaga, let it slip that on the evenings of ekadashis a large pot of milk, some bananas, and a small quantity of khai and nabata are placed in the master's bedroom. Very early the next morning, Jaga removes the empty pot and washes it..... We would like to plead his case as follows. Let the eyewitness who has seen the zamindar emptying the pot come forward for like judges in a court of law we are absolutely unwilling to accept hearsay and conjecture as evidence. All the more so science textbooks state unequivocally ‘Liquids evaporate.’ Is milk not a liquid?” (Senapati and Mishra, 2005)



Here Senapati is taking a swipe at the legal discourse, which lays a great deal of importance on logic over what is commonsensical. Here while persuading the readers to believe in the non-official discourse of the villagers, the narrator attacks the legal and scientific discourses by exposing their fragility and how easily they can be used to misrepresent the truth. Thus Senapati puts both discourses into dialogue and lets the reader decide which of these are more suited to them.

Another example of dialogic in *Six Acres and a Third* is when Senapati while describing Champa (an uncouth and undignified woman), invokes an extremely respectable prayer which is used for Goddess Saraswati, who stands for Knowledge and Wisdom. The lines composed by Senapati parody the way Kalidas described the physical features of goddess Saraswati upon his first encounter with the deity.

“Her eyes are decorated with kajal,

Her mouth full of betel,

Her body massaged with oil and turmeric paste,

Draped in a sixteen cubit saree,

She moves as fast as a she-dog.”( Senapati and Mishra,2005)

Here Senapati is not just parodying the lines of the classical Sanskrit poet Kalidas; he is opening up a dialogue between traditional and modern poetry. Because of the narrator's unreliability, it is difficult to find out which school he sides with. He lays bare both the good and bad aspects of both in his illustrious tongue-in-cheek style, criticising the ancients for their far-fetched similes and the moderns for their blind imitation of the western *ruchi*. Thus Senapati opens up a genuine dialogue between the two schools of poetry on how to describe a woman and again invites the active reader to

participate in the discussion and have their inferences.

Thus, the text has become a much more complex version of itself because of the shift in critical momentum directed towards it. With the critical perspective broadening over time, it has been possible to unravel the hidden potential of the text as a post-modernist novel. This has done the reputation of Senapati a world of good as because of these interventions he is now being considered a true world author and is being compared to writers like Marquez and Rushdie although he had extremely limited exposure and lacked a tradition like these authors. This further asserts the fact that criticism does play an extremely important role in constructing a text and in its reconstruction as well.

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