

Impact of *The Waste Land* on Odia Literature: Revisiting Guruprasad Mohanty's *Kalapurusha*

Mary Mohanty

Former Prof and Head; P.G. Department of English, S.C.S College, Puri, Odisha

Abstract: *Kalapurusha*, a long poem, which is included in the anthology titled *Samudrasnana* (1970), crowned Guruprasad Mohanty (1924-2004), a renowned Odia poet of the 1950s, with Sahitya Akademy Award in 1973. He is regarded as a pioneer of the modernist movement in Odia poetry. A student of English literature, Guruprasad Mohanty, set a new trend in writing Odia poems. He is credited with writing four anthologies of poems titled: *Nutan Kavita* (1955), *Samudrasnana* (1970), *Ascharya Abhisara* (1988) and *Kavita Samagra* (1995). Writing only ten sonnets, he revived sonnet writing in Odia while it was dying.

His *Kalapurusha* was unquestionably influenced by the epoch-making poem of T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*. It is a landmark in Odia poetry. Like Eliot, Mohanty has dealt with the modern themes of alienation and other crises like morbidity faced by modern man. He has interwoven his poem into his time, expressing the feelings of frustration and loneliness of people with deft use of language—no wonder this poem influenced successive generations of poets in Odia. This paper is a humble attempt to compare these two epoch-making poems based on theme and technique.

Keywords: Modern man, alienation, morbidity, myth, irony

Guruprasad Mohanty (1924-2004) is one of the most influential poets of the 1950s of Odisha. His *Kalapurusha* (*Death*), which is included in the anthology titled *Samudrasnana* (*Sea Bath*) (1970), crowned him with the Central Sahitya Akademy Award in 1973. He is regarded as a pioneer of the modernist movement in Odia poetry. He brought about a revolutionary change in the theme and style of writing Odia poetry. He is credited with writing four

anthologies of poems titled: *Nutan Kavita (New Poems)* (1955), *Samudrasnana (Sea Bath)* (1970), *Ascharya Abhisara (Wonderful Meeting of Lovers)* (1988), *Kavita Samagra (Collection of Poems)* (1995) His *Kalapurusha* is unquestionably influenced by the epoch-making poem of T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*. It is a landmark in Odia poetry. Mohanty deals with the themes of alienation and other crises like morbidity faced by modern man. He interweaves his poem into his time, expressing the feelings of frustration, loss of spirituality, sterility, degeneration of moral values, boredom and loneliness of modern man with deft use of language.

Some critics say *Kalapurusha* is an imitation of the legendary poem *The Waste Land*; some others say it is a translation of that great poem. However, it is neither an imitation nor a translation of *The Waste Land*; it can better be called a recreation of that poem in the Indian/Odisha context. It is recreated from the ethos of the post-Independent modern Odisha, and the poet attempts to explore and express the predicament of a modern man suddenly grappling with many problems.

Before Independence, all enthusiasm and energy of Indians/Odias were diverted towards one goal of achieving Independence in India. After Independence, that definite goal was no longer present. So, Indians/Oriyas lost their enthusiasm to struggle for an ideal. They wanted political power, and this competition for power pervaded all spheres of life. People wanted power and money by hook or by crook. Corruption crept into all spheres of life. Moral and spiritual degeneration, exploitation, sterility, impotence, loneliness, boredom, frustration and despondency spread in post-Independent India/Odisha. Like Eliot's *Waste Land*, which depicts the disenchantment, disillusionment, moral and spiritual decadence and disgust of post-First World War Europe, Guru Mohanty portrays the corrupt and decadent post-Independent modern Odisha.

Kalapurusha was first published in the magazine *Prajna* in August 1960. After its publication, many critics questioned its originality and denounced it as a blind imitation of *The Waste Land*. They called it the 'Cuttack edition' of *The Waste Land*. This poem created a sensation in the sphere of Odia poetry, deviating from the traditional romantic strain and setting a new trend of realism and modernity in theme, language and style. However, Mohanty acknowledged the influence of *The Waste Land* on his *Kalapurusha* to the editor of the magazine *Prajna* in a letter.

The Waste Land is divided into five sections (*The Burial of the Dead*, *A Game of Chess*, *The Fire Sermon*, *Death by Water* and *What the Thunder Said*). Since 1914 Eliot had been writing it in fragments, and it was finally published in 1922. All five sections comprise 433 lines. Similarly, *Kalapurusha* consists of five sections and 379 lines.

Unlike *The Waste Land*, it is relatively easy to understand. Eliot begins his poem with a description of April, the spring season:

April is the cruellest month, breeding
Lilacs out of dead land, mixing
Memory and desire stirring
Dull roots with spring rain. (*The Burial of the Dead* 43)

These lines subvert the conventional description of spring as a season of joy. Perhaps April is “the cruellest month” for Eliot as it is the season of the crucifixion of Christ. It also introduces the theme of death in life and consciousness of pain and suffering, which are repeated in Eliot's poetry. Mohanty begins *Kalapurusha* with a description of the rainy season. He writes:

The rainy season is cruel and harsh; it makes Rangani flowers blossom on
the heap of cow-dung/By the side of walls, stirring dead roots with new
life, pulling roots out of soil./The rain falls, the rain falls, stirring near-dead
bald rees/At their roots, the ceaseless rain falls. (72)

However, Mohanty's rainy season is not entirely a season of pain and suffering. It is a harbinger of hope as well. He is optimistic about regeneration: 'There is hope in this rain, there is blessing, health and life without disease, and rest in it./This rain brings hope for paddy fields and mango orchards' (75). Rain brings great relief from the scorching heat of the summer in India. It revives all types of life here.

Eliot extensively uses quotations, allusions, myths, images and symbols from various sources like the Bible, Baudelaire, Shakespeare, Virgil, Dante, Ovid, Homer, Buddhism and the works of literature and cultures of many countries. On the other hand, Guru Mohanty uses myths only from Odia scriptures, particularly *the Mahabharat* and *the Bhagavat*. Eliot inspires him to use myth to express modern man's moral and spiritual degeneration, loneliness, sterility and despondency.

Like Eliot, Mohanty uses myth to draw a parallel between the past and the present. Perhaps Guruprasad takes the title from the '*Musala (Mace) Parva (Canto)*' of *the Mahabharat*, which describes the destruction of the Yadavas with the emergence of 'Kalapurusha', meaning 'Death', who kills all the *Yadavas* in Dwaraka, moving from street to street and the valiant warriors of Dwaraka can neither injure him nor hinder him with their best efforts. He refers to this mythical incident to 'compare and contrast' and to draw a parallel between the cruelty, evil deeds and moral and ethical degeneration of the *Yadava* dynasty of Sri Krishna and the contemporary corrupt and polluted life, sorrow and suffering, the sterile and diseased mentality of the post-Independent modern man, particularly Odias in this poem.

Like the despondent and cursed life portrayed in *the Waste Land*, Mohanty portrays the life of futility, emptiness, sterility, hopelessness and utter despondency of post-Independent modern Odias/Indians/man. In his words:

There is tiredness of all emptiness and futility like endless stretches of sands
of the Kathojodi river Description in newspaper, condolence meeting, brief

biography Evening emerges or sacred rain of the month of *Shraban* emerges
from the dusty sky We wait for party and election

The sorrow of polluted soul, corrupt nightmare of life. (86-87)

Again, he describes the despondency and futility of life in the following lines: 'Futile and inexpressible sadness is seen under the cold eye-balls/Futile and inexpressible noise of worms, and insects is heard/Under the tie-court-pants or Gandhi-caps or under silk sarees' (75).

Mohanty depicts how corruption has corroded the great religious institution like Emar Mutt at Puri, which is known for its glorious past of around two hundred years. Its religious glory has faded because of corrupt *mahants* (Head priests) and others associated with it. He is apprehensive whether another great religious institution like Ramakrishna Mission would survive the invasion of corruption: 'How far is Emar matt from Ramakrishna Mission?' (86).

Eliot presents modern man as mythological Tiresias, a man and woman. He writes:

I Tiresias, though blind, throbbing between two lives...

...I Tiresias old man with wrinkled dugs

Perceived the scene, and foretold the rest . . . (*The Fire Sermon*, 51-52).

Like *Gerontion*, he is an older man who is naturally passionless.

Mohanty presents modern man as neither a male nor a female—he is both. It is the predicament of post-Independent modern man that he/she can never enjoy the pleasures of sexual life. He is incapable of it. He/ She is like Ila, a mythical hermaphrodite who is cursed to lead such a life: "I am born a male, and I bedeck like a female / Silk saree, pant-court, impotence and delivery pain are coupled in me / . . . I am Ila, the only son and daughter of the king' (85).

Like Eliot, Mohanty throws Light on modern man's loneliness and boredom and impotence. The sanctity of family life is corrupted because of infidelity on the part of both men and women. The woman desperately wants to talk to her husband to overcome her

boredom and loneliness: 'Speak, speak I feel very bad, the pictures in the theatres are bad, radio sings bad songs/ Speak, speak, why are you silent/I do not like anything'— Marx, Gandhi, Jagannath Das (77).

He depicts the silent suffering of women exploited because of their poverty in post-Independent India. In ancient India, women were elevated to the place of deities. It was said that where women were revered, gods resided there. Gradually after Independence, women were treated as 'objects' to be bought and sold to be enjoyed. They have no choice but to satisfy the carnal desires of men for their livelihood. Women bear this humiliation and moral degeneration like a dormant cobra lying in the forest: 'I am a cobra lying motionless in the forest,/I bear millions of pains of my limbs, heart and soul (Mohanty 80). Here Mohanty takes the allusion from *The Bhagavat*.

Like Eliot, Mohanty portrays modern men and women who do not follow social, religious and moral values. They are social types and symbols of decadent modern society. Men characters like engineer Smarta Das, businessman Bose babu, and Deputy Collector Ramu and women characters like *Pratima*, *Minati*, and *Meera* belong to this category.

He uses the myth of King *Parikshita* from *The Mahabharat* to portray modern man's fear of death and his anxiety and horror because of his corrupt and immoral deeds. King *Parikshita* is the grandson of the *Pandavas*. He is the last surviving heir of the *Pandavas* after the great war. One day, King *Parikshita* loses his way in the forest while hunting. The thirsty King asks for water to sage *Samika* who is in deep meditation. When the sage does not respond, he is enraged, puts a dead snake around his neck, and returns. He commits a heinous crime by polluting a pious sage representing *Dharma* (Righteousness) and spiritual faith. When the sage's son returns, on seeing his father, he is furious and curses that the snake *Takshak* will bite the King to death within a week. The King is frightened and spends his days listening to *the Bhagavat Purana* to attain *Moksha* or salvation.

He also depicts the presence of the mythical 'One-legged bull' with his painful cry, which symbolises the arrival of the *Kali Yug*. Here the crippled 'bull' symbolises the depraved state of modern man.

Eliot presents the predicament of the post-War modern man who has lost his faith in these lines:

Here is no water but only rock
Rock and no water and the sandy road
The road winding above among the mountains
Which are mountains of rock without water.
...But dry sterile thunder without rain (*What the Thunder Said*, 56).

Here 'water' and 'rain' symbolise spiritual grace that modern man cannot receive. In *Gerontion*, the protagonist says the same thing: 'Here I am, an old man in a dry month, / . . . waiting for rain' (23).

Similarly, standing on the stone- bridge at Ranihat on a rainy day, the narrator in *Kalapurusha* feels as if the rain and wind are telling the tale of inexpressible exhaustion and broken-heartedness of modern man: 'Tiredness and utter tiredness of heaps and heaps of broken images of this planet' (82).

Besides, Guru Mohanty narrates modern man's all-pervading gloom and despondency through the images of 'dull sand', 'colourless grass', 'pale earth', 'dull sun-rays' and 'endless thirst and thirst'. The narrator views only:

A silent wide expanse of sand and sand
Colourless grass and sand and the pathless and pale earth
Dull sun-rays and pathless pale sky above
Colourless sand and grass and endless thirst and thirst
Dull dusty motionless sand and sand and sky (83).

All these images of Mohanty recall Eliot's images of 'only rock', 'the sandy road', 'rock without water', and 'sterile thunder without rain'.

Like Eliot's 'London bridge', Guru Mohanty refers to the 'Ranihat bridge' of Cuttack in *Kalapurusha*. Unlike 'London Bridge', which symbolises an aimless teeming crowd, 'Ranihat bridge' in Cuttack represents neither crowd nor aimlessness of modern life.

Further, Mohanty uses mythical characters *Akrura* and *Udhaba*. The narrator says that he is burdened with the futility and agony of modern life like those two devotees of Sri Krishna, and like them, he wants deliverance from the misery of his materialistic life through a spiritual journey in order to attain salvation. In the words of Mohanty, 'Hey Akrura, hey Uddhaba, my soul-mates/Wait, wait, I carry a burden like you' (73). Following Hindu philosophy and Buddhism, Mohanty believes that a moral and spiritual regeneration is possible for modern man if he can sever all materialistic attachments and adhere to a spiritual way of life. *The Light of Arundhati star*, which symbolises purity and faithfulness, will show the right path to modern man amidst the encircling gloom of life.

Eliot ends *The Waste Land* with words from the *Upanisad*: '*Datta, Dayadhvam, Damyata./Shantih shantih shantih*', which implies 'give, sympathise, control'. Perhaps Eliot wants to convey that the regeneration of the decadent moral and spiritual values of post-War Europe lies in adhering to the Upanishadic teachings of Indian philosophy. Similarly, Mohanty ends his poem by invoking Light:

If this planet starts its decadent journey from darkness . . .

If this planet starts its decadent journey from death . . .

If this planet starts its decadent journey from falsehood . . .

Lead me from mortality to immortality

From darkness to Light

From illusion to truth.

Om, peace, peace, peace. (87)

Here Guru Mohanty expresses the message of around 60,000 great sages who congregated at Naimishyaranya to invoke Light to dispel the pall of gloom from the face of the earth. It was the juncture of the *Dwapar Yug* and the *Kali Yug* when Sri Krishna was dead, *Dharma* (Righteousness) and *Jnana* (Wisdom) disappeared from the earth, and the earth plunged into the deep darkness of unrighteousness and ignorance. They chanted the *mantra* (Incantation):

Om asato ma sadgamaya.

Tamaso ma jyotirgamaya.

Mrutyorma amrutam gamaya.

It implies, 'Lead me from illusion to truth/ From darkness to light/ From mortality to immortality.'

In *Kalapurusha*, Guru Mohanty depicts a realistic picture of the materialistic self-indulgence of the morally and spiritually decadent post-colonial India/Odisha. Like Eliot, he depicts the predicament of the modern man who is conscious of his sexual ineffectuality and emptiness of life. As a result, the modern man also suffers from a sense of guilt and failure. Other poems of Guruprasad Mohanty, like *Gobara Ganesh*, *Alaka Sanayal*, *Harekrushna Das (1)*, *Harekrushna Das (2)*, and *Akrura Ubacha*, depict the same predicament of modern Odisha. Besides, like Eliot's poem, the 'I' of this poem does not have one identity. It is divided into many personae. Guru Mohanty deviates from the Sanskritised language of his predecessors and uses commoner language with wit, irony and metaphor to express his thoughts and ideas. *Kalapurusha* ushered in a new era of modernity in Odia poetry and influenced successive generations of Odia poets like Ramakanta Rath, Sitakanta Mahapatra, Soubhagya Kumar Mishra, and Rajendra Kishore Panda. Jatindra Mohan

Mohanty rightly says that perhaps it would not have been possible to write *Kalapurusha* without *The Waste Land*.

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