



Jhaverchand Meghani's *Sorath Tara Vahetan Pani (Echoes from the Geers)*: A novel of region

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Abstract

In literature the perception of Regionalism or local colour usually refers to fiction or poetry that focuses on specific features-incorporating characters, dialects, customs, history and topography of a particular region. Jhaverchand Meghani (1896-1947) was a celebrated Gujarati poet, litterateur, social reformer and freedom fighter. To represent entire Sorathi, either ancient or modern life, in literature has been the chief concern of his literary activities. The chief endeavor of the novelists seems to characterize a particular region and its socio-cultural dimensions through which the quest of national identity has been carried out fruitfully. Hence, Meghani has visualized the ideal portrait of cultural identity, self-image and overall personality of 'Saurashtra' vicinity in his novel entitled *Sorath Tara Vahetan Pani*. The chief tone of Meghani's creativity is not only the Sorath or its folk-life, but also the broad humanity amassed with it.

Keywords: regional novel, folklore, local colours, saurashtra region, humanity, socio-cultural dimensions

Introduction

Thomas Hardy, the well-known English novelist illustrates his Wessex novels as "Novels of character and environment". It has been viewed that: a 'regional novel' means fiction that is set in a recognizable region, and which describes the features distinguishing the life, social relations, customs, language, dialect, or other aspects of the culture of that area and its people. Fiction with a strong sense of local geography, topography or landscape is also covered by this definition. In such writing, a particular place or regional culture may perhaps be used to illustrate an aspect of life in general, or the effects of a particular environment upon the people living in it. And one usually expects to find certain characteristics in a regional novel: detailed description of a place, setting or region, whether urban or rural, which bears an approximation to a real place; characters usually of working or middle-class origin (although in some regional novels people of these classes may be absent, and in a few the focus may be on a family or lineage and its connection with local landscape or history); dialogue represented with some striving for realism; and attempted verisimilitude (Snell 1).

In literature the perception of Regionalism or local colour usually refers to fiction or poetry that focuses on specific features- incorporating characters, dialects, customs, history and topography of a particular region. This approach in writing is considered to be influenced by Southwestern and Down East humor, between the Civil War and the end of the 19th century in American literature. According to Brodhead, "regionalism's presentation of vernacular cultures as enclaves of tradition insulated from larger cultural contact is palpably a fiction... Its public function was not to mourn lost cultures, but to purvey a certain story of contemporary cultures and of the relations among them" (qtd. in Sharon Tally 353). It has been observed that the local colour fiction contributed much to construct unified nationhood of America during the 19th

century through chronicling the nation's stories about its regions and mythical origins. In case of regional novel writing in India, there doesn't seem any integrated movement. The factor like linguistic modification of states after receiving independence in the year 1956 is considered responsible in fostering the consciousness of regionality. The linguistic reorganization is thought to have offered the space and liberty to literary artists to represent the oppressed and marginalized in literature. Hence, regional novels acquired its worth in the light of the political movements fought for conferring the equal human rights to deprived classes.

The narrative takes place in the drawn picture of such a region. The novelist after handing over particular identity to region moves towards portraying its social reality. This sort of representation of region expands the writer's sagacity of place to his perception of self-hood itself. The narratives aim at bringing together the integrated past, which is lost in the course of time because of interfering factors like colonial impact, industrial revolution and changing values. They strive to generate the pre-colonial or pre-industrial natural history of that imaginative or natural land. Looking to the regional appeal in the Gujarati novels, the novelists like Meghani, Pannalal Patel, Ishvar Petlikar and Madia introduced the picture of the region, either imaginative or real, in their novels to define nation with its indigenous culture and civilization. Jhaverchand Meghani (1896-1947) was a celebrated Gujarati poet, litterateur, social reformer and freedom fighter. Chotila of the Panchal region in Saurashtra was his birthplace. Mahatma Gandhi spontaneously gave him the title of *Raashtraveya Shaayar* (National Poet). He authored more than 100 books and won the prestigious awards like Ranjitram Suvarnachandrak and Mahida Paaritoshik in Gujarati literature. His first book was the translation work of Rabindranath Tagore's ballad *Katha-u-Kaahinee* entitled *Kurbani Ni Katha* (Stories of martyrdom) which was first

published in 1922. He carried out the meticulous investigation of the folk-literature of Saurashtra region for several years by wandering either on foot or riding horses and camels. He published such folklores in different volumes of *Saurashtra Ni Rasdhar*. A sample of his collection of folk tales from Saurashtra has also been published in English, translated by his son Vinod Meghani. The three volumes published so far are titled *A Noble Heritage*, *A Shade Crimson* and *The Ruby Shattered*. Manubhai Pancholi 'Darshak', an acknowledged authority on Meghani, very appropriately judges his status viewing that: "Every age needs its bard. The great bard of our age is Meghani. He does not dab with the era bygone. In one hand he holds the present and in the other the future. Meghani is the voice of the era" (*Echoes from the Geers* 336). To him the sources of inspiration remain the Panchal Region. Suggestions about the shaping sources of Meghani's creativity are also evident in his own writings:

I was nursed by the waters of Panchal for only about five weeks after my birth...when I beheld Panchal again; it was bathed in the dimming twilight of dusk.... Hills had continued to nurture my growth... The deep streams that penetrated the rocky hills and their gorges haunted by solitude were my childhood mates... A yearning to lovingly explore and record the chronicle, and not at all a childish nihilist craving to see a revival of that era, has been nagging me ever since. I am not abashed to admit it (*Echoes from the Geers* xxv-xxvi).

To represent entire Sorathi, either ancient or modern life, in literature has been the chief concern of his literary activities. Yashvant Shukla notes in an article entitled "Sarjanno Pradhan Sur" that as far as man has the bondage of the human body, his world of experience remains limited to that extent, is quite natural. Though, the artist or literary author can experience far vast than others, yet as earthly human being he must have limitations of his vast experience. Hence, there isn't anything wrong if a person like Thomas Hardy prefers the earth of Wessex suburb and its folk life to depict his perceptions and the man like Meghani to give concrete form to his sensitivities, prefers the earth of Sorath and its folk-life. Shukla is of the view that the chief tone of Meghani's creativity is not only the Sorath or its folk-life, but also the broad humanity amassed with it. Meghani calls it humanity. He has always accepted that such humanity cannot be the only privileges of Sorath, but also becomes the universal wealth of geography wherever man dwells (Mistry 15-16 Trans.). According to Meghani the folk narrative *Sorath Tara Vahetan Pani* (1937) is the story of the folklore of Kathiyawad (now Saurashtra) region of Gujarat, which has neither a hero nor a heroine nor a trio amor, but the multitude residing in the entire Saurashtra assumes the centre stage:

Several characters are cast in the mould of the individuals who are still alive and therefore it would be inappropriate to mention their names. There are few characters whom I have endeavoured to shape from the essence of the environment then prevalent in Kathiyawad rather than to base them on individuals. I have narrated the story in the form of a page from

history. Chronology of events and portrayal of individuals it may or may not provide history of a people it certainly is (*Echoes from the Geers* xx).

In a larger context Hasu Yagnik in an 'Introduction' to this novel views it a pathfinder of new vistas not only in the Indian, but also in the world literature and comparable to Marquez's *In Evil Hour* representing a specific period of history (*E.F.G.* vi-vii). From nature's point of view the region narrated by Meghani is distinct in itself, of which the 'cultural values of its subject have been flourishing. Meghani has written the novel, depicting the folk life which creates the environment of the two decades of Sorath region before the First World War. The Sorath region and its forgotten folk-communities have been made alive in his writings. To survive the ancient and vital regional values against the changing scenario of modernity, the whole community is shown suffering and seems ready to sacrifice for the sake of self-respect. Hence, the major source of inspiration is not an individual, but the narration of entire regional life. The novelist has woven together the multi-colored form of social life along with the story of police inspector Mahipatram and his daughter's son Pinaki. The live environment of Sorathi local life along with its rivers, the small bridges, the valleys, the ruins, the thickets, the stations, and the markets found in romantic environment attached to a heart beating land of native Sorath. The farming is at the center among the local businesses due to the fertility and distinct nature of Panchal land. The character of Sheth (Navo Khedu) expresses his feelings for Sorath land in his words and deeds: "This world of mine is the world of flora... I do not belong to the man-made society. I live in a world of trees. I, too, am a tree... Mother earth is a true mother, not only to me. She always expands, makes place for all her children and provides them with a roof." (*E.F.G.* 310, 312)

The character named Rukhad Sheth engages the Bharadi people in farming who were dacoits formerly. He becomes their protector. He states:

The ultimate refuge of everyone is mother earth.....Those who had earlier forsaken her have now returned; wearily longing to lay their heads in the very lap they had run away from.....Tormented souls are home at last... Why shouldn't they be...? Here all their urges are fulfilled...? (*E. F. G.* 293).

Rukhad Sheth hails from Vaniya (A trading community mostly following Jain religion) engaged in trade and commerce) community, but is bold enough to fight with lion. The narrative also introduces his valour that once he had fought a lion with his bare hands and torn into two (8). The man like Lakshaman is shown a devotee of cows, who later turned into an outlaw to fight the unjust plunder of a pasture for the cattle. The novel describes the charming characters like the farmers, traders, cattle-raisers and other self-employed professions from similar social strata. Meghani states in 'a foreword' to this novel that through the portrayal of Pinaki "I have endeavoured to illumine the various facets of the Kathiyawad's (Saurashtra region) evolution, i.e. its adolescence, maturity and the advent of the utopian,

sentimental and inspired rebel attitude” (xxii).

The characters portrayed by the writer enjoy their life, mostly in harmony with the earth. Their life values, the customary beliefs, the traditions as well as practical approaches all have been depicted which expands the expression of regional specialties. The faith and superstition like ghosts, witches, the beliefs to please Goddesses and strange worshipping ceremony, etc. are mostly observed in rural culture. The writer himself says: “There are those who can brave cannonballs falling on their chest day in and day out, but cannot bear a trifle like a bad omen” (*E.F.G.* 122). While depicting the life of the twentieth century, beginning phase, the writer demonstrates the wonder of the people by showing the curiosity of the people when they see the motor car. They name the motor car as ‘*Bhunkangadi*’ [the honking cart] (*E.F.G.* 199). The real personality of this land emerges when Gora (the Britisher) appreciates the true spirit of Kathiyavadi to Mahipatram in the following words:

Weird are these communities of Kathiawar! I think of the Bhavar youth, of Sumariya who hanged himself, of Rukhad Sheth... Such fine chivalry fast decaying, eh?... A pity indeed! These brave and noble generation is fast disappearing, Mahipatram! If I were a high-ranking officer in the Army, I would have proposed the formation of a Saurashtra regiment, a regiment, not made up of the men of a single community but drawn from the entire Saurashtra region (*E. F. G.* 83-84).

Generally, Meghani uses the common language, but while presenting the Janpadi (rural) environment, he applies the figure of speech like simile and the turn of the sentences which highlights the specific representation of Sorath region:

- Like helpless dogs pathetically gazing from behind the bars of a trap-cart, the villagers craned their necks above the station fencing and stood on the outer side of the platform watching the train come in sight and approach the station (*E. F. G.* 5).
- The cart-driver hallooed the bullocks and in beat with his heckles twisted the tail of the bullock on his right as he was rinsing a massive water.-soaked rope (*E. F. G.* 13).
- Like a snake-charmer enticing his tamed snake to coil back into the hamper, the darkness began to fold the daylight back into the basket of the night (*E. F. G.* 9).
- An infant of about ten months sat in the woman’s armpit, nay, almost clung to the crook of her arm, sucking her dried up and shriveled breast that looked like a pigeon mauled dead by a tomcat (*E. F. G.* 65).

The novelists attempted to confirm either traditional or transitional phase of regional life wherein one can observe its two-folded form: excellent as well as poor. The chief endeavor of the novelists seems to characterize a particular region and its socio-cultural dimensions through which the quest of national identity has been carried out fruitfully. Hence, Meghani has visualized the ideal portrait of cultural identity, self-image and overall personality of ‘Saurashtra’ vicinity in his novel entitled *Sorath Taran Vahetan Pani*.

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