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"My Village My Mind": Prafulla Mohanti's Internal Landscape

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Proposals for the 2003 Special Topic Issue of the *South Asian Review*

It is planned to publish two issues of SAR in 2003, the regular issue and the special topic guestedited issue. Detailed proposals are invited from well-established South Asianists for this special topic issue that will be published in June/July 2003. Among several important considerations are the suitability and the significance of the topic within the broad objectives of the journal and the proposer's ability to secure funding from his/her institution for the publication of this issue. **The deadline for the receipt of proposals is March 31, 2002.** Please direct all correspondence to: K. D. Verma, Editor, *South Asian Review*, University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, Johnstown, PA, 15904. Telephone (814) 269-7143; E-mail: kverma@pitt.edu.

"My Village, My Mind": Prafulla Mohanti's Internal Landscape

When I am in London I forget about the dust,
mosquitoes and the frustration of living in India.
All that remains in my mind is a beautiful vision of
glorious sunsets and loving friends. I long to return.
(*Changing Village, Changing Life*)

Geoffrey Kain

Embry-Riddle University

Toward the end of my 1998 interview with Prafulla Mohanti, I asked the rather innocuous question, "How would you like to be remembered?" a question whose context implied an answer of either "as a painter" or "as a writer."¹ Instead, he responded without hesitation, "as a village boy." Coming from a sixty-two year old man, speaking at his home in west-central London, one may find this to be an intriguing response. Yet it is clear from Mohanti's paintings, from his books, and from any conversation with the man that he is never far from his native Orissa village of Nanpur. His passion for his village, his mantra-like repetition of particular details from his past, and his critique of the West lead one to wonder why he has not returned to Nanpur permanently (he has lived the majority of his time since 1963 in London, though he returns to Nanpur for a few months each year), rather than to live a life primarily divorced from not only the source of his artistic inspiration but in fact the focal point of his consciousness. Why does he "sing the village eternal," what has it to do with his personal experience, and what does his depiction of the village reveal about the artist and his work? The answers to these questions, which lie partially in his four published books,² are suggested by his paintings and

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drawings, and are further illuminated through his conversation. Together they help to establish a portrait of an artist who is much more complex than the clear, concise lines of his prose or the pure, broad bands of his abstract watercolors might suggest. Mohanti *is* a village boy and the village he occupies—or that occupies him—is as much an ethical matrix as it is a physical location; as much a refuge from personal pain as it is a place on the map; as much or more a temple of childhood memory as it is a contemporary, changing collection of homes, shops, and individuals.

The village of Mohanti's youth, *the village* in the sense that Mohanti often speaks of it, is disappearing, as he makes amply clear in his work. He admits, for example, in *Changing Village, Changing Life*, that

My village is changing. A straight road was built in the mid-sixties to carry iron ore from the mines to the port at Paradip, forty miles away. It runs right through the village, dividing it into two. In 1974 the first bus came to the village connecting it with the rest of India. The road has brought noise, pollution, and all the pressures of urbanization. Balichandrapur, the market place two miles away, has turned into a town without any plan or design. Nylon, stainless steel, plastic, fizzy drinks have reached the village. Electricity has come too but there are frequent power cuts. There is a cinema and a video hall, and the television set has become an accepted part of the dowry. Whisky and rum are sold openly in the market place and there is even prostitution. This is progress, I am told. (7-8)

The changes he cites here are clearly presented as a corruption of the village as it exists (or existed) in a sort of essential or more ideal state. Interestingly, Mohanti notes the appearance of prostitution alongside the coming of stainless steel and plastic, implying that these materials are the harbingers of an invasive decrepitude and immorality—particularly as they seep into the village willy-nilly, without thoughtful planning, upsetting the inherent order of things.

The apparent lack of planning or design associated with change in the village disturbs Mohanti not only because he was for a time, professionally, an architect-town planner in England, but because he perceives the forces driving this change to be

destructive to the vital ethos that defines the village. As he explained during our interview,

What the village has helped me to understand—the basic philosophy of life, of existence—here in the West it is “produce more, consume more, waste more.” So man is in a trap. He can't escape. But in the village it's “produce what you can, consume as little as possible, and waste nothing.” . . . But these traditional values *are* being neglected . . . Those with more spiritual values don't have much of a chance, I'm afraid, to protest against the system, which is like a bulldozer. (7)

The bulldozer is particularly an apt figure of speech because it ties the haphazard development Mohanti deplores to the implacable destruction of specific values he desperately wishes to see survive and continue to dominate village life. Those values emerge throughout the corpus of his work, but are also succinctly summarized in his first publication, *My Village, My Life* (1973), which stands, Mohanti indicates, as “the first time that a book has been written by an Indian villager about his own village” (17). Amongst the values Mohanti cherishes he lists close human relationships and a strong sense of community, so much so that “nothing is private”; hospitality that expresses itself in an open door policy—“people come and go without invitation”; respect for local arts and crafts as inseparable from village identity and generational continuity; a slow pace of life and an elastic sense of time; respect for old age; reverence for the land; recognition of family as the cornerstone of the social structure; piety, humility, and above all a perpetual consciousness of dharma (15-16).

However, Mohanti seems to hold little hope that the pervasive spirituality and the simplicity and economy of village life can withstand the force of an intrusive modernization. He makes it clear that he recognizes the threats facing the villages, particularly the threat of natural disaster and insufficient employment as the population grows. The population of Nanpur, for example, has more than tripled since the publication of *My Village, My Life*. He admits that as he looks to the future he is frightened. “People are crying out for employment and labour is cheap”; while he anticipates it, he says: “it is surprising that no industrialist has yet exploited the situation and built a factory to mass-produce, say, shoes, for

example. This would mean many people in Nanpur spending their lives doing jobs requiring little skill or intelligence; whatever art and craft is now left would be lost" (*My V, My L* 220). His response to this problem is that the provincial and national governments should commit to a development plan that "needs vision and imagination" (*My V, My L* 221) and that could, perhaps, offset a disastrous, mindless development of the entire nation—a development plan that would recognize the village as the foundation of India's national identity:

As I travelled around England I saw how rapid industrialisation had ruined the countryside. . . . I came to the conclusion that since the majority of the [Indian] population lived in villages, the village should be taken as the theme for India's development. Groups of villages should be developed as social, cultural and economic units under broad regional and national plans. These units exist in a natural way all over India. My aim was to plan and design them with imagination. Each unit would have a market place with a community centre containing a theatre, art gallery, school, library, advice centre and health clinic. Work would be provided in the villages with small-scale industries to help the communities and with a co-operative system for farming and crafts. (*ChV, ChL* 6)

Mohanti has sent his ideas to government officials in India, but has received no reply. Returning annually to India he notes that he has met only with apathy and steadily decaying conditions.

The changes he describes and his reaction to them place Mohanti in a position that has been frequently and amply criticized. In a 1998 lecture at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, for example, Farrukh Dhondy discussed the inversion of the romantic depiction of the village in the film *The Bandit Queen*. Dhondy was pleased that the film countered the sweetened descriptions of the village as a place of innocence, harmony, and good will; more accurately, he indicated, the village, as the migrations to the urban areas attest, is a place of disease and destitution, and if one should be so fortunate as to escape from it, one would surely never return. When confronted with this viewpoint, Mohanti responded that

I don't think Dhondy knows anything about the Indian village life. He has never lived there. He has lived in Bombay and in England. One thing he doesn't mention is the system of support in the village. In time of need, real

need, they will come to help you. . . . you live because others *want* you to live—unlike here, where you live because *you* want to live. (Interview 7)

Others, like John Sinclair, would undoubtedly criticize Mohanti's "romanticism" as patronizing. Sinclair rejects the view that

Third World countries should defend the natural innocence of their traditional values against corrupting incursions of Western "materialism." To the extent that this view [during its ascendancy in the 1960s and 1970s Western counter-culture] has romanticised wretchedness, conflated all non-Western cultures and patronised genuine Third World aspirations for material improvement, we would not regard it as tenable today. (158)

It would be unfair to suggest that Mohanti has "romanticised wretchedness," while it would be accurate to point out that he has clearly preferred certain aspects of "pre-modern" or "pre-mechanized" village life. He has not in any of his work ignored, suppressed, or somehow glorified conditions that Sinclair may characterize as "wretched." Instead, Mohanti clarifies early in *My Village, My Life* that while as a child in the village "life was full and exciting," and still "there were darker sides of village life which worried me" (14). He has offered for his readers innumerable descriptions of villagers who appear to be "malnourished" or "ragged," many accounts of deaths following from hunger or snake bite or cholera or typhoid, such distressing aspects of village life as the indifference of the state relief agencies following disasters like floods or cyclones, famine, etc., and caste prejudice and the ostracism of certain individuals because of disease. As Ganeswar Mishra reminds us in "How Does an Indian Village Speak?", Mohanti in his books does not primarily offer a personal interpretation of village life so much as he instead allows the village to speak for itself. The structure of *My Village, My Life* (and *Changing Village, Changing Life*) is a series of interviews with and lengthy monologues from various inhabitants of Nanpur who themselves reveal their hopes and fears, joys and sorrows. In presenting his material in this way, as Mishra points out, Mohanti remains true to the traditional Indian narrative that is (a) oral and (b) episodic.

Mohanti's insistent and intensive focus on the village and his quest for meaning in the timelessness of the village voice definitely follows the Gandhian line; he reminds us of Gandhi's proclamation that in the villages lives the soul of India (*My V, My L* 9; *ChV, ChL* 10). As Gandhi remarks in *Hind Swaraj*, "It behooves every lover of India to cling to the old Indian civilization even as a child clings to the mother's breast" (57). Mohanti's lamentations over the steady loss of tradition in the village in the face of increasing mechanization are closely tied to Gandhi's own commitment to Swaraj and his convictions about "this cursed modern civilization" (56) which worships bodily comfort above all and from where, sadly, even the figures of Hindu gods are mass produced (84). In a similar vein, Mohanti remarks that

In the village, art is not just about decoration, it is a way of life. A pot, a sari, a piece of jewelry—*everything* is handmade using mechanical means to help the hand, rather than having machines that make the hand redundant. That's what worries me in the West—the body has become redundant, the *brain* has become redundant . . . the *human being* is becoming totally redundant now. (Interview 10)

Of course, Mohanti's apologies for village life do follow from deeply personal experiences, but rather than being simply a Gandhian reactionary-conservative, or a romantic neo-Ludditism, his views should also be read as carefully crafted critiques of the "modernization theories" emerging from the West during the 1950s and 1960s that have considered "development" to be a natural, inevitable global process, a process which, in the underdeveloped countries, requires the assistance and guidance of the developed nations of the West.³ In this sense his responses, particularly in his vociferous suspicions of moneyed politics and of the multi-national corporations, are allied more closely with the neo-Marxists who see the village as ripe for exploitation. The disruptions to traditional village life are often driven by forces of cultural imperialism, most tantalizingly through the medium of television. And, as Mohanti, says, "It's not all Coca-Cola and blue jeans." There is "the imperialism of ideas." I put the question to him directly:

GK: Do you see this kind of colonization as intentional and aggressive? Or is it just something that happens: an

expressive discourse coming out of the West that happens to influence those who tune in to it? Are the values and desires created because the technology is being adopted, or is it an intended program of creating ever broader markets?

And he replied:

PM: It is a way of expanding markets, not a method of educating people. Those who profit do not concern themselves with educating people—in fact, they would like them to be ignorant. If I were educated to keep my needs simple, many of these businesses would go bust. . . . But I'm afraid we no longer want this way of life; we apparently want the other, most wasteful way of life. (9)

Mohanti's commentaries on change in the village are tinged with both sadness and bitterness; one might say that he sees the pressures on the village to be a form of deadly assault. Mohanti's personal and moral identification with the village as it existed before the veins of industrial development and corporate advertising closely parallels his memory of events in his life prior to what must be considered the turning point in his own experience. Even more significant than his passage to England is his brutal beating by a white racist gang in London's East End in the middle 1970s, which he describes in detail in *Through Brown Eyes*. The association of this experience with his perception of a degraded or assaulted India, and his subsequent intensive commitment to the ethos and order of the village prior to western or westernized intrusion (as a sort of "fall") hold the key to Mohanti's vision.

As he recounts it in *Through Brown Eyes*, he was returning home by underground train to Wapping in London's East End one night in 1974 when he was followed by two teenaged boys, a young woman, and a middle-aged woman, all white. On the elevator from the rail platform to the street-level exit, one of the boys confronted him and spit in his face. He asked the boy why he didn't "behave properly," and the four then followed him into the street, taunting him about "stinking like curry." The boys then attacked him, beating him senseless, while the women cheered them on (159-60). Mohanti was unconscious for a time, bleeding from the nose, mouth, and ears, managed to call an ambulance, and was taken to the hospital. His inner ear was damaged, and he continues to this day to suffer from acute back pain caused by the attack. But the

most severe and chronic pain has been psychological. At first, he writes,

I had dreams of people marching through the streets of London accompanied by hair-raising music. They were carrying banners. A well-known politician led the March, wearing the skulls of Asians round his neck. They stopped in Wapping outside my flat. I was dragged down and presented to the politician.

"You are a threat to our purity," he said. "You must leave."

"I love my friends. I want to stay," I pleaded.

He gave an order to a man standing with an axe. I was forced to kneel down and bow my head. Soon it was detached from my body. A spurt of blood became a stream and ran down to the River Thames, gradually turning it red. My parents sat beside the river, crying.

...

Red is my favourite colour and while painting I choose it spontaneously. For me it symbolises life, creation, energy. But when I painted again the colour red started to flow like blood. (162)

The beating is not an experience that Mohanti has left behind, although it occurred more than twenty-five years ago. The "incident," Mohanti says, "was a total rejection of my existence" (Interview 13) and has epitomized, on a personal level, the very same callous, aggressive impulse that forces itself upon the village in the guise of haphazard development, pollution, and the lure to consumerism and individualism. The identification of the man with the village cannot be underestimated. As Mohanti has said, "Wherever I go, I carry my village inside of me" (Interview 1).

We can thus consider the village (*as village*) to be an internal locale for Mohanti, a place of retreat. His most positive associations with the village undoubtedly center on his experiences in childhood. As he describes it,

Nanpur is the most beautiful place in the world. . . . My childhood was very happy and secure. I felt I belonged to the village and the village belonged to me. . . . I played with my friends in the dust of the village streets. . . . Nobody disturbed us, even the cows walked carefully by. In the monsoon, the village streets became small rivers on which we sailed small paper boats. I danced happily in the rain. . . . I enjoyed the brilliant moonlit nights. . . . I saw the paddy fields change through the seasons, from vivid

green to gold, the mango trees blossom, . . . the multi-coloured birds, the brilliant sunsets and sunrises. It was magic. (*My V, My L* 13)

This is the village of Mohanti's memory, the village he longs for but which, when he returns to India, he finds largely eludes him. Loren Eiseley has written at length on this attachment to images that, associated with what one regards as "home," may in themselves actually become home. He notes in his book *The Night Country* that

this feeling runs deep in life; it brings stray cats running over endless miles, and birds homing from the ends of the earth. It is as though all living creatures, and particularly the more intelligent, can survive only by fixing or transforming a bit of time into space or by securing a bit of space with its objects immortalized and made permanent in time. (229)

Eiseley's reflections on animal behavior remind one of the experience and expression of many emigrant writers, but none perhaps so much as Prafulla Mohanti. Instead of Nanpur as he has embedded it in his mind, what Mohanti faces when returning to India now is mostly "corruption, inefficiency, apathy, callousness. And he admitted that because of this situation he was feeling "suffocated" (*Ch V, Ch L* 7). He told me that he cannot seriously consider returning permanently to Nanpur because although he does cite the villagers' support of one another as central to the village ethos he so cherishes, as someone coming from the West, from England, from a place the villagers had led him as a child to believe was paradise, he "would be forced at this point to become a social worker. People now come to me with *all* of their problems. If someone is ill and needs money to go to hospital, or someone's son needs money for education, or somebody's hungry and needs food," he will come first to him (Interview 6). Mohanti does give himself to the village, of course—he has built a school in Nanpur, for instance—but the expressions of need become overwhelming.

Mohanti's quest for, or his occupation of, the spiritual essence of the idealized village also parallels his approach to painting—not to his illustrations so much, which are representational and ordinarily depict aspects of village life, but his abstract works, particularly his intensely brilliant

watercolors, paintings that have brought him international acclaim and that are held in private and public collections in the UK, India, the Philippines, Japan, the United States, and various locations throughout Europe.⁴ Mohanti has remarked on the dominance of the circle as a motif in his work by noting that his first drawing lesson came as a very young child in the village when he was repeatedly asked to draw three perfect circles on the mud floor with a piece of clay chalk, repeating, "Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwar," (*Ch V, Ch L 3*) and, further, that

my first visual experience was the round vermilion spot, the red bindu, on my mother's forehead. Later on I watched vivid sunrises and sunsets. Shalagrams, little oval stones, were worshipped by my mother and the forms used in the village are mostly circular. The circle has been ingrained into my system and has molded my thoughts. The lotus of my childhood has undergone changes through abstraction, from a circle to a point, bindu. Absolute abstraction makes it disappear to shunya, nothing. From this nothingness life begins again and becomes everything, the total universe. (Interview 14)

Also, the village deity, Mahlia Buddha, a small stone icon whose presence is central to the village collective experience and consciousness, and whose power has embedded itself in Mohanti's own psyche (he admits to still feeling acutely aware of Mahlia Buddha whenever he returns to Nanpur), is in the shape of an ellipse (or Shiva lingam). All of these factors help to explain the centrality of this form in Mohanti's painting, and as he explained it to me, while he paints, particularly when he begins to paint improvisationally, he is able to temporarily forget the physical pain which plagues him and he moves almost unconsciously, again and again, to the central form of the circle or ellipse. "When I draw circles, I am at one with myself. . . . Certainly the circles have meaning—the symbolism is there because it is from the spiritual village landscape which I have received" (Interview 14).

Mohanti's discussions of his own life are reminiscent of his painting: overlapping ovals, rings proceeding from a single point, like a pebble dropped into a pond. His present situation is an accumulation of some rather unlikely events—a youth from a remote Orissan village sitting now in London as an

acknowledged artist, an articulate English stylist, a widely read and informed critic of contemporary art and literature. As his literary works suggest, Mohanti is intensely focused on retracing and exploring the events that have led to his intriguing present, and his thoughts always lead back to the beginning, back to the village. India/Britain, London/Nanpur, present/past—the contrasts are vivid, yet one has come to inform the other, and the two have become deeply interfused. Mohanti's current project, a reminiscence about his education as an artist, promises to delve deeper still into the roots of his boyhood in Nanpur. Mohanti reminds us all that the present is an accumulation of past events, past influences, changed locales. The serenity the artist has sought—particularly since his brutal "rejection" in the London of 1974—cannot be found in Nanpur any longer, especially as the village in which he grew up continues to be developed in ways he deplors. Instead, Prafulla Mohanti has clearly become a citizen, "a village boy," of a village that stands as a spiritual home, an internal landscape, an area of pure color located near the center of a series of increasingly dark concentric circles.

Notes

1. See my "An Interview with Prafulla Mohanti."
2. Mohanti's four books, to date, are: *My Village, My Life* (1973), *Indian Village Tales* (1975), *Through Brown Eyes* (1985), and *Changing Village, Changing Life* (1990).
3. See Tomlinson, 143 ff.
4. Mohanti's paintings are held in collections at the British Museum; the National Gallery of Art and Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi; Leeds City Art Gallery (England); Wakefield City Art Gallery (England); Brighton Art Gallery (England); University of Leeds; University of Sussex; University of Kent; Museum of Modern Art, Berkeley (U.S.); Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta; Air India; First National City Bank, Manila (Philippines); Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and a number of International private collections as well.

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**Second International Conference of the United States Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies, April 26-28, 2002
Santa Clara University, California**

"Rethinking Commonwealth/Postcolonial Literatures: Cartographies and Topographies, Past and Present"

Amitav Ghosh's novel, *The Glass Palace*, was recently named a finalist for the Commonwealth Writers Prize. In asking that it be withdrawn from the competition Ghosh objected that "this phrase anchors an area of contemporary writing not within the realities of the present day, nor within the possibilities of the future, but rather within a disputed aspect of the past. In this it is completely unlike any other literary term (would it not surprise us, for instance, if that familiar category 'English literature' were to be renamed 'the literature of the Norman Conquest'?)." This novelist's objections demonstrate that the notion of "commonwealth" or "postcolonial" can be called into question and its implications should be explored as the world's global geo-political economy further expands into the new century. If among Commonwealth or Postcolonial literature and languages we also include, as is sometimes done, not only materials in English from current members of the British Commonwealth (Canadian, Australian, Anglophone Africa, etc.) but also in writings in French, Spanish, Portuguese, Kikuyu, and all major South Asian languages, what are the boundaries of this expanding field of research? Papers dealing in some way with aspects of this topic are encouraged, but so too are others that may not seem immediately implicated in the question. Possible topics, among others, would be: Multifocal approaches to the study of language and literature: commonwealth, multiethnic, postcolonial, and transnational perspectives—Commonwealths: global-regional reconfigurations and transformations at the turn of the century—The impact of technology on postcolonial literatures (Santa Clara University is in the heart of Silicon Valley)—Questions of local or national languages in the creation of "new" literatures—"Maps" (personal, national, philosophical)—Close readings of individual works or sequences in one or several authors' writings—Cross-cultural comparative analyses of texts; US culture and ethnic American literatures—Pedagogical issues, either undergraduate or graduate—Proposed panels and roundtables on topics of mutual interest—Film—Creative readings by authors **Deadline for abstracts and panel/roundtable proposals: January 15, 2002.** 300 word abstracts should be sent to: John C. Hawley, Dept. of English, 500 El Camino, Santa Clara University, Santa Clara, CA 95053. English Department FAX: 408-554-4837. Email: jhawley@scu.edu.