

Phanishvar Nath 'Renu's *Maila Anchal (The Soiled Border)*: A Novel Communicating
Regional Perspectives

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Abstract

Phanishvar Nath 'Renu' (1921-1977) was one of the most successful and influential writers of modern Hindi literature in the Post-Premchand era. Renu's *Maila Anchal* (1954) [*The Soiled Border*] is considered a modern classic. The trend of regional novel started with this novel in Hindi. The novel incorporates the celebration of Indian Independence, the assassination of Gandhiji and the removal of the oppressive land tenure system. The life of rural region Maryganj has been portrayed vividly integrating its diverse religious, social, political and economic facets. Renu seems to show the gradual transformation of the economic backwardness under the impact of modernity. The rural consciousness generates after seeking independence from colonial hegemony. The backdrop of Bihar, the rigid caste division, the agitation amongst landless Santhal community, folklores and poems, the several love stories, etc. introduced in a very insightful manner make the novel more interesting characterizing contemporary rural India.

Key Words: region, community, oppression, caste-division, folk literature, social disorder.

Phanishvar Nath 'Renu' (1921-1977) was born at village called Aurahi Hingna near Forbesgang in Araria district (then Purnia district) Bihar. He was one of the most successful and influential writers of modern Hindi literature in the Post-Premchand era. His short story *Mare Gaye Gulfam* was adapted into a film *Teesri Kasam* (The Third Vow) by Basu Bhattacharya in 1966 for which he wrote the dialogues. His short story *Panchlight* (Patromex) was made into a TV short film. Renu was awarded the Padma Sri in 1970, though later during Jayprakash movement, he gave up his award in solidarity. The entire narrative introduces the dynamic personality of the writer. The biographical sources regarding his pen name reveals that Renu was nicknamed as 'Rinua' by his grandmother which changed into 'Renu' (dust) afterwards. Phanishwarnath is better known through his pen name

'Renu.' He actively participated in 1942 Quit India movement and went to jail. The sources also mention that as a member of Socialist party, he managed the propaganda of several peasant movements and played an active role in the Human Rights Movement which took place after independence. As a result of his close connection with Jayprakash Narayan: the eminent political leader, he was inspired to pursue the socialist philosophy.

Renu's *Maila Anchal* (1954) [*The Soiled Border*] was first published in early 1950s, in the Post-Premchand era, at a time when young independent India was trying to redefine its identity as a nation. It is considered a modern classic. The trend of regional novel started with this novel in Hindi. This social novel offers the live portrayal showing the trials and tribulations of a small group of people in a remote village of Northeast Bihar during

the Quit India Movement. The reference of a young doctor (dagdar Babu) who took care of the masses at that time has also been conveyed in the novel. In an introduction to the first edition of his novel, Renu says that the novel is *Anchalik Upanyaas* (Regional Novel). It narrates the story of Purnia (one of the districts of Bihar state) which is located near Nepal, Pakistan and West-Bengal. The novelist further notes in an 'Introduction' (August 9, 1954) to this novel that he has depicted one of its parts and focused especially on it as a symbol to backward village, where there are thorns and dust, mud and sandalwood, beauty and ugliness. The novel narrates the story of the horrible fight in the landless community called Santhals. The source of Renu's novels is located in Purnia district. His novel concentrates on contemporary history. The narrative offers the story of achieving freedom and the incidents took place after independence, i.e. the assassination of Gandhi and various incidents within a period of one and half year. It has been considered that the locale explored by Renu focuses on the fate of Congress politics in post-independence Mithila region of north Bihar.

Indira Junghare has translated this novel into English entitled *The Soiled Border*. She has translated the original Hindi text as literally as possible. In order to maintain its readability, Junghare has used the neutral mode at times, avoiding some of the spicy taste of Renu's idiom and style. The narrative chiefly concentrates the village Maryganj, which is named after an English woman named Mary, the bride of indigo planter Martin. It is located in Purnea the border district of Bihar. The region Purnia (Puraniya), a land of lotuses

is well-known for its pink and red lilies. The novel incorporates the celebration of Indian Independence, the assassination of Gandhiji and the removal of the oppressive land tenure system gradually. The life of rural region Maryganj has been portrayed vividly integrating its diverse religious, social, political and economic facets. Renu seems to show the gradual transformation of the economic backwardness under the impact of modernity. The rural consciousness generates after seeking independence from colonial hegemony.

Maila Anchal doesn't remain the story of any single person, but relates the entire region. It consists of several sub-plots. Besides, the love affair between Dr. Prashant and Kamla, the novel also incorporates the romantic relationship between three more couple: Baldev and Lachmi, Kalicharan and Mangala Devi and Khalasi and Phuliya. Dr. Prashant arrives in the village to treat people who were suffering from malaria and black fever. He also saves the nearby village from the threat of a cholera epidemic. While serving Kamli, he falls in love with her. Dr. Prashant is arrested afterward on charges of inciting the Santhals to riot and being a communist. After his release, Prashant marries Kamli and give up his scientific career as he was conducting research on malaria and severe fever.

Renu introduces the political scenario and caste-division of people as each of this group seems to dominate others. Baldev, a cowherd is a member of congress party whereas Kalicharan wishes to engage Santhals and other laboring class to join the socialist activities. Vishvanath, a tehsildar after losing his past dominance, becomes a member of Congress party. The Rajput community favours a Hindu rightist

group known as 'black cap' whereas Socialist party receives its strength from Santhal and other labour community.

Bavandas, the dwarf is introduced as a powerful personality who can easily convince the entire folks. The narrative shows that Gandhiji too had reverence for him. Though, when sees the corruption and casteism in the congress party, loses his faith and in an attempt to stop an evil of smuggling on border region sacrifices himself by allowing himself to be run over by a bullock cart. His body is thrown into the river which divides the two countries: India and Pakistan. After his sacrifice, he becomes the object of worshipping. The novel ends in a positive note. The five *bighas* of land is returned to each household. Renu's sympathy seems to go with socialists. Though, along with the attitude of Congress people, he also criticizes the socialists simultaneously.

Renu depicts the rigid caste-system prevalent in the society. There seems a rivalry between Rajputs and Kayastha community for social dominance. The Brahmins and Rajputs do not prefer to sit with others at the feast given in the *math*. Tehsildar belongs to Kayastha family in Maruganj gains the higher social status because of his educational advancement. The Brahmin community has the highest ritual status, but their economic status seems low. The Santhal community, in comparison to other caste possesses a large group, but lack of education and economic backwardness has placed them at the bottom in social hierarchy. The setting of residence also introduces their superior or inferior caste status. The castes, considered to have higher status like Rajputs, Kayasthas, Brahmins and Yadavas usually reside in the centre of the village whereas

the untouchables reside on the outskirts of the village. After Indian Independence, the land reform act was implemented to abolish the *Zamindari* system. Some of the villagers of Maryganj are also shown active in this movement. The issue of land reform generates the confusion among the landlords as a result they grab more land from the Santhal community. The caste conflict reaches to its climax and resulted into a revolution against *Zamindari* system. Renu shows the facets of caste discrepancy as the major evil located in social order since past in India and delineate to what extent it remains an obstacle in protecting the societal harmony. For example, Prashant is often asked 'to what caste' he belongs; he uses to reply as 'My caste? Doctor!-caste'. Doctor? Doctor!-caste? Is it Bengali or Bihari? He simply answers them he is 'Hindustani' (*The Soiled Border* 46). Such mentality exposes their rigid outlook and social partiality.

Renu also seems to expose the evils spread in religious section of society by viewing the disgraceful position of religious places called *Math*. The Mahants of Maryganj are shown deviated from the ideal path of saint Kabir. They use to smoke ganja and keeps woman like Laxmi and Rampiyari as their *dasis* (female-servants).

Renu is a regional novelist. He employs the well-known proverbs, puzzles, devotional song and certain literary pieces of national anthem as an integrated part of folk literature. Sometimes he seems to twist such literary devices in order to generate the satirical influence. The entire descriptions of the novel confirm that he has control enough over the local language spoken in that region. The writer represents the variety of sound at different

level as per their gender characteristics. The male while playing the duff produce the sound 'Da Digga' and in response to it the female seems ready to face the challenge when utter 'rim rim-ta-dhin-ta'. The male beats only 'da! da ! da! da!' While female response with rim! rim! rim! rim!. Such descriptions offer a particular rhythm and produce the musical effect in the novel. The linguistic complexity of the novel makes it more difficult to understand properly especially for readers unknown to regional Hindi language. Renu employs the certain regional dialects along with standard and colloquial Hindi. The language uttered by characters obviously reflects their social background. The spoken Hindi language - the *khari boli*, the language as we hear and live is brought to the pages by the novelist at various stages. Renu himself remained a resident of that region and was very much aware of the socio-linguistic levels and dialects of native people.

The narrative incorporates certain literary devices like blending of folksongs and usual sayings. The character of Khalasi sings the ballad based on lovers. While singing the songs he seems to imagine his own love affair with Phuliya. The dance drama and *nautanki* -folk drama about the revolutionary hero Bhagat Singh are also brought in the novel by Renu to make the reader familiar with rural culture.

The celebration of event in Maryganj when India got its freedom on the 15th of August, 1947, is represented through many voices. Renu also introduces his sense of humour. He doesn't seem to prefer the hypocrite people like Baldev, who identify himself as a strict follower of Gandhi and worshipper of non-violence. He is attracted by an illicit wife of blind

Brahmin and experiences 'exceptional fragrance' around her body. Bavandas declares that the soul of Mahatma Gandhi sometimes enters in his body which shows the extreme level of abnormal personality. Renu shows the pitiful situation of Lachmi through criticizing Baldev's exploiting nature. The writer doesn't seem to hesitate over depicting the sexual relationship. Renu highlights the contemporary sketch of India through his *Anchalik* Novel *Maila Anchal*.

The folk-language and modernist attitude employed by the novelist clarifies the rich and bright form of *Maila Anchal*. He could reach up to the ethics of social strata through such literary experiment.

Indira Junghare observes in an 'introduction' to this novel regarding the title that "the image of the soiled border of a sari is the image of a woman weeping. When Kamli learns she is pregnant, she cries, saying her sari is stained, meaning 'her family name is ruined'. 'Mother India', who dwells in the villages, is crying because her sari border is soiled". (*The Soiled Border* xxiv) Renu indirectly suggests through characters that 'Mother India' seems weeping due to the collapsing human values and social disorder. Consequently the title remains appropriate and evocative.

Hence, Renu's *Maila Anchal* (*The Soiled Border*) remains one of the most admirable novels ever written in Hindi. The backdrop of Bihar, the rigid caste division, the agitation amongst landless Santhal community, folklores and poems, the several love stories, etc. introduced in a very insightful manner make the novel more interesting characterizing contemporary rural India.

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