



Revisiting the History of Konark through Pratibha Ray's *Citadel of Love*

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Abstract

Odisha is widely acknowledged as the land of temples all over the world. It has a distinct recognition because of its rich culture and tradition. Konark temple which is also known by the name of “Black Pagoda”, is an ageless artifice created by King Narasingha Deva, a ruler of the Ganga dynasty. It was built in the thirteenth century near the district of Puri, Odisha. The temple is built resembling the Kalinga architecture, by the eminent architect Bishu Maharana, as stated in the history of Odisha. Pratibha Ray, as a writer, has a unique skill of blending myths, lore, and legends with supernaturalism and superstitions, presenting them in a new light. In most of her writings, these thematic elements are dominant. For instance, *Adibhoomi*, *Ygayaseni*, *Silapadma*, *Magnamati* are some of her seminal works. Some of them have been rendered in English like *Citadel of Love*, *After the Deluge*, and *The Primal Land*, for its popularity and fame. Ray has beautifully narrated the history of the making of Konark with a fusion of magic realism. This paper aims to highlight the history of Konark Temple through the author's masterpiece *Citadel of Love*.

Keywords: Konark, History, Retelling, Myth, Tradition.

Introduction

Art is timeless and serves as a reminder to help us stay connected with the roots of tradition. Konark is such an immortal piece of art that has survived through centuries parallel to the evolution of humans. It has witnessed minutely, the people, culture, relationships, love, sacrifice, hardships, etc. It is a living witness of the unbearable pain and separation of the artists in order to create such a mesmerizing beauty. Built on the model of unique Kalinga architecture, it is a rare edifice of art, which represents the Sun God's chariot of 24 wheels driven by six horses. The art is filled with symbolism and meanings, which gave Pratibha Ray the scope for further interpretation. She chose this above all other subjects to be the central focus of her fiction, *Silapadma*, which was first published in Odia and later translated by Monalisa Jena into English.

Pratibha Ray is an Indian academician and a writer, born in 1943 in a remote village in Jagatsinghpur district, Odisha. She is the first woman to win the Moortidevi Award. She is best known for her outstanding pieces of fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *Barsha Baisakha Basanta*, is a bestseller. She tries to bring order to society through her revolutionary writings. She started writing at an early age and established herself as a leading fictionist in India with the motif of changing the mindset of the people. Ray opines in one of her interviews:

I am a humanist. Men and women have been created differently for the healthy functioning of society. The specialties women have been endured with should be nurtured further. As a human being however, woman is equal to man.

She exhibits remarkable skills in studying the human mind and behaviour, especially of tribes and other characters. She is the recipient of the Jnanpith Award, Sahitya Akademi Award, and Padmashree Award for her tremendous contribution to the field of Odia Literature. Ray's writing skills, if unveiled, would seem quite ambiguous and complex because of so many things in it. She takes up not only contemporary issues of society but also debatable topics like gender issues, social inequality, and stereotypes which often prove her to be a revolutionist. For some, she is a communist, and for others, she is a stern feminist. Her writings have many themes and characters and settings just appropriate to set the mood of the readers.

Monalisa Jena, as a translator, has significantly contributed to translating various important works from Odia Literature. Hailing from Odisha, she has contributed to volumes in various genres like an anthology of poems, short stories, and several translations. Her short-story collection includes *Indramalotira Shloka* and *Nilamadhabi*. She also wrote the biography of a renowned Odia Poet Ramakanta Ratha besides translating several works like *Dasuram's Script*, etc.

Citadel of Love is a tale of love, sacrifice, myths, superstitions, and folklore set in the thirteenth century, when the famous Konark temple was built. It takes readers to the history of the making of Konark under King Narasingha Deva's patronage. This is a tale of passion and sacrifice that spans centuries, encompassing a much-ignored part of the past. Akin to the Taj Mahal, it has witnessed many love stories in the past and present and their sufferings. So, Konark can also be called a monument of love and a sacrificial edifice. The narrative in the text has supernatural elements, an eerie setting, and fictitious characters that throw light on the history of the making of Konark.

Pratibha Ray carves a niche for herself in the domain of fiction writing for her unique contribution as a novelist. The narratives in her various novels depict the past that was hitherto ignored and neglected. She brings to the fore the forgotten past by juxtaposing myth with reality. In the context of characterisation, she sketches various characters that seem to be fictional representations of the people of the past. For instance, the writer successfully enlivens the different characters in the novel such as Kamala Maharana, Chandrabhaga, Prachi, Charles, and Silpa, and the challenges faced by these characters, and lends the readers a glance at the rich heritage in terms of art, culture, and architecture.

As the story unfolds, we come across a modern researcher, Charles, who comes to Konark in order to carry out his research. He discovers many antique pieces and archaic objects used in the past like palm leaf manuscripts on which few tales were written. He has a jaw-dropping experience as some unusual things begin to happen. He has a haunting experience as he can see a strange figure and soon after that; he travels to the past when the figure was alive during the construction of the masterpiece, Konark. He is gradually attracted to a post-graduate student of history named Prachi, and new love blossoms in his life. Earlier, he had experienced love through mystical love stories of the past. The novel is a combination of real and supernatural, facts and fiction, experience and imagination, sacred and profane. It is a historic tale of love, sacrifice, ideals, hope, frustration, heartbreak, separation, etc., presented in a unique way to the readers.

It is a complex narrative and can have multiple interpretations by various critics. The text also shows the rich culture of Odisha, formerly known as Kalinga, by taking the reader to the past where Odisha was ruled by kings. It took huge effort and sacrifice for the people of Odisha to establish a separate identification and be completely free from dependence, though we still find dilapidated palaces, caves, forts, ponds, and gardens used mostly by the kings. The luxurious culture of the monarchs still influences the eating patterns of the people. Odissi dance is popular across the world because of its unique steps mingled with gestures and expressions. The language Odia is quite sweet and heart-melting, which wins the heart of millions. Due to its rich culture and heritage, many foreigners get attracted to it, like the protagonist of the novel, Charles, who is fascinated by the extraordinary charm of Konark. There are elements of magic realism in the text that combine naturalistic details and narrative with surrealism or dreams. It presents before us a realistic view of the world with the addition of magical elements. The term magic realism was first used by Franz Roh, a German critic, though the genre had its source in Latin America. As an oxymoron, it mingles both realism and imagination as a tool to bring out the extraordinary. It often questions the basis of reality and further highlights the creative power of the writer, where the final outcome is the culmination of fact and fiction. Roh first used this term in 1925, aiming to experiment with more realistic patterns. Magic realism was also used by eminent Indian writer Chitra Divakaruni Banerjee in her seminal work, *Mistress of Spices* (Renuga, 2019). Salman Rushdie also used this technique in his masterpiece *Midnight's Children*. These important texts show the meaning of the combination between magic and reality in the contemporary world, where mostly fantastical elements are included in the narrative. One of the characteristics of the narrative that stands out is the detailed description of the artwork in the temple. The writer foregrounds the predicament of the women through different characters and lends an insight into their marginalised state. The poignant life of various characters moves the readers and offers a glimpse of the magnitude of toil and sacrifices that the artisans had to make during the construction of the Konark.

Citadel of Love is not only a tale of passion but also of culture. It retells the history of Konark through elaborate descriptions of architecture, paintings, and sculptures. There are men and women dancing, posing, and engaging in romance in the paintings carved on the wall. There are birds and animals of different kinds and even gods and goddesses with luxurious ornaments carved on the stone. For the people of Odisha, it is nothing new but for a person from a different country like Charles; it is something extraordinary and fascinating. Kalinga architecture is quite rich and mysterious as Konark itself. Ray has beautifully portrayed its beauty and charm. When Charles arrived at Konark and came to know about the magnificent aura behind the stories of Konark, he started experiencing strange things. Perhaps the beauty and charm of Konark had a lasting impression on him. He pondered over it so much that it started haunting him. He could see statues carved on the walls of the temple. There was a capturing power in the architecture that held the spectators' attention. The statues and sculptures of Konark are mesmerising and mysterious. The dance of beautiful maidens on the campus to the music of *mridung* drums added charm and vigour to the ambience. The setting seems just more than appropriate for creating suspense amongst the readers. The statues and images painted on the wall come alive in the mind of the protagonist. At night, when Charles was roaming, he could hear the sound of anklets tinkling in the solitary campus. He could feel all the stones, statues, and walls of Konark as living entities having souls. The myriad experiences led him to view Konark as a living soul.

Ray wonderfully describes the charming yet haunting beauty of Konark. While everyone slept, it remained awake. Charles came here for research, but seeing all these activities, he became more curious to know about its history. Once in his dream, a damsel in distress haunted him. His mind slipped back seven hundred years and several events started

flashing before his eyes. Even Vishnu Maharana, the narrator of the story, narrates to Charles that he could see things in the dark and hear voices as well. When Charles came face-to-face with a bride who committed suicide, he thought that he saw the ghost of the dead Chandrabhaga, wife of Kamala Maharana. The statues which were carved on the wall by Kamala Maharana were realistic and, according to some people, the models very much resembled his own daughter Silpa. Due to his hard work and talent, he was given the title of 'Silpi Siromoni'.

Contrasting images are shown by the writer to bring out the cultural difference between Prachi, an Indian student, and Lillian, a girlfriend of Charles. Ray focused on this comparison in order to show the difference that exists between East and West. Lillian is an independent woman who doesn't find the carved statues of Konark beautiful and enchanting. She could only take it as visual entertainment and fun, whereas Prachi is totally contrasting her. She is intelligent, gentle, conservative, and shy. As a researcher, she is solely devoted to her studies. She values the art and culture of the state. She got married at a very early age of thirteen and unfortunately, her husband left her when she was too young. She waited all her life for her husband like the wives of the architects of Konark, who waited for 16 long years. The writer portrays Prachi as the epitome of Eastern culture.

Ray also mingles myths into her narrative, such as Vishnu Maharana narrating about Samba, the son of Lord Krishna, about his curse, his deadly disease of leprosy, and how he got rid of it. There are mentions of Gods and Goddesses throughout the text, highlighting people's belief in religion and myth. As the author writes, "*The Kapila Samhita* also mentioned that the Sun God himself has assumed the form of an enormous banyan tree" (Ray, 2015, p.22).

The term 'myth' has been known to have originated from the Greek word 'Mythos', which denotes that a story has come from religion or general belief of the mass belonging to a particular time period. Myth refers to a conventional story that has a direct connection with lore and has supernatural elements, whereas history throws light on the events of the past projecting facts. When mixed together, it forms a unique piece of literature like *Citadel of Love*. To define:

Myth is one story in mythology- a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group, and which served to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities and other supernatural beings) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives. (Abrams, 2006, p.170)

Toyenbee holds a firm opinion about direct connection of mythology and history saying:

History, like the drama and the novel, grew out of mythology, a primitive form of apprehension and expression in which, as in fairy tales listened to by children or in dreams dreamt by sophisticated adults, the line between fact and fiction is left undrawn. (2003, p.25)

Evidently, the novelist makes use of myths profusely in the narrative. The constant incorporation of mythical references shows her ardent love for Indian mythology. The novelist acquires the traits of both a historian and a philosopher in her personality through the technique of interwoven plot. As a historian, she takes up all efforts to acquaint the reader

with the ancient tradition of her state, and as a philosopher, she tries to glorify the fundamental ideals and values inherent in India's age-long cultural heritage.

Historical fiction is an emerging literary genre where the incidents of the past are given much emphasis. Historical novels often try to picture all the existing details of the time as accurately as possible for authenticity, which often includes various aspects, for instance, social norms, manners, customs, beliefs, and traditions of the population as it is solely based on records and facts. Similarly, *Citadel of Love* is based on the history of the making of the legendary Konark, as per the folktale and belief of the public.

The text not only talks of our culture but also throws light on the scriptures and teachings acquired from it. Ray chooses the history of Konark as the major subject here, particularly the history of Konark. The process of building the temple started in the thirteenth century. The narrative details how twelve masons were built by the sacrifice of the king for the nation to make the dream of Konark come true. It was built in a Herculean style: huge, magnificent, and beautiful. The most interesting fact about it is that it was built by Kamala Maharana and his twelve hundred artists, who worked day and night to make Konark a heritage. Their sacrifice cannot be expressed in words. These artists left their families and dedicatedly worked in order to make the giant monument stand. The major character is played by Silpa who came of her own will in order to be a model for Kamala Maharana, the chief architect of Konark. The statues we see, carved on the walls of Konark are because of the effort of Silpa. Konark stands for our cultural heritage and Silpa worked selflessly for the making of those magnificent statues. It is her extreme devotion to Lord Jagannath, and her motherland that let her act as a model for Kamala Maharana. Her father was very sad when he heard about the demise of his daughter. When Konark was finished, she was ordered by her father to leave Konark and him forever and settle in Sri Lanka leading a life of a *sanyasini*. But destiny had decided something else for her. In order to help a few travellers in a ship from a whale, she jumped into the ocean and drowned. Her sacrifice immortalised her in the hearts of the people forever and they thought her to be a goddess.

Waiting patiently for our male counterparts is very much a part of our culture right from time immemorial. What would the wives of the merchants do when their husbands would go for business across the seven seas? The same is the fate of the young and beautiful Chandrabhaga, the dearest wife of Kamala Maharana. Soon after his marriage, he had to leave her and go to build the Konark. Hardly the couples had seen each other's faces when life hit them hard with the sudden blow of separation. Kamala Maharana would always think about his beautiful wife ever since he left her. When the artists were busy giving final touches to the statues, Maharana often touched the statues and conversed with it:

Chandrabhaga! You can feel my touch over there, I am certain. Because I can sense you breathing. I know you will wait for till eternity. That is why I am leaving your image here in a posture of waiting. This waiting my beloved, will immortalize the temple of Konark. (Ray, 2015, p.168)

Maharana waited eagerly till the end to meet Chandrabhaga but unfortunately, he heard about her demise due to some unknown disease. Love and separation have been dealt with wonderfully in the text. Ray has incorporated many themes, myths, and beliefs of the people in order to make it sound real and imaginary at the same time. Ray has portrayed Konark as an eternal symbol of love and separation. With the description of Gods and Goddesses, she elevated the art of Konark, making the Sun God alive and riding his chariot of wheels. He is taming time; past, present, and future. The author has taken readers to a world where

everything is predestined. The fate of all the characters Kamala Maharana, Chandrabhaga, Prachi, Charles, and Silpa seem to have been already decided.

Ray being a prolific Odia writer has mingled myths, superstitions, and lore in her masterpiece *Citadel of Love*. It is not just a story of love and separation but also of the culture of Odisha. She has excellently infused illusion and magic realism into history and facts so that the end product will be a complete one, catering to the needs of the reader. People of all generations would fall in love with the text at first reading because of its enchanting narrative and well-balanced structure. The novel is so rich in illustrations that it makes all the statues, stones, carvings, and walls of Konark come alive before the eyes of the reader. The writer has brought many new elements to the forelight which was totally veiled. The rich culture of Odisha which is mostly found in temples is highlighted here. Temples are lively and every monument has a story to narrate as Konark. We see Konark as an antique artistic beauty of Kalinga architecture but have never known the sad reality behind it. Right from the artists to the models and even kings endured much to make it stand as an epitome of culture. The author's efforts are quite commendable in collecting the folklore and myths surrounding Konark in the form of a surreal novel that exactly fits between time past (13th century) and the present day. She uses magic realism to present facts in a fictionalised form to grab the attention of modern readers. Here, Konark is presented as the citadel of love much like the Taj Mahal, which stands as exemplary of love and longing. The subject matter chosen by the author is itself so elevating that every reader would be proud of reading it. The characters long for unification but it seems beyond their control. The world is presented as a controlled sphere where love has lesser role to play than destiny. People follow the ideals of God and Goddesses and try to be perfect like them. It is not only the story of unconditional love and sacrifice but also the history of the making of Konark, which stands proudly today as an element of sacrificial edifice popularly termed as the 'citadel of love'. Ray has wonderfully drafted the text bringing both the sacred and the profane together. Towards the end, the author seems to convey that separation strengthens love connection rather than extinguishing it. Separation actually strengthens the bond of true love and makes it immortal like the charm of Konark.

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Bio-note

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