Pratibha Ray (b.1943) belongs mainly to the post-modern phase of novel writing in Odisha. In the 1980’s when the modern fictionalists came almost to a stage of exhaustion in thematic novelty, narratological experimentation and the mid-century preoccupation with existentialism and character studies, Pratibha Ray and others found themselves almost in a cultural void where the inherited past could not serve as an inspiring model to build upon their fictional edifice. In other words, the modern novelists like Gopinath Mohanty, Santanu Kumar Acharya, Surendra Mohanty and Chandrasekhar Rath had exhausted the possibilities of a cultural continuity by positioning man without a viable moral centre or a free will to carve out his niche with some semblance of dignity. Gandhi and Marx, radical moralism and violent reformatory strategies were found to be effete. The rebel as well as the messianic hero did not have any relevance any more, and the search for resuscitation of classical values ended in an uncertain alley, so to speak, for most of the modernists. Gopinath Mohanty’s novels attempted to uphold human dignity despite the dehumanizing process of modernity. Both his pre-modern adivasi milieu and the urban, existentially alienated life situation stifled human dignity, which he transcended by either a violent assertion of being or a self preserving compromise; his Paraja and Laya Bilaya are cases in point. In his Mati Matala (The Loamy Earth) he envisages a rural earth-centric order with a fictional mix of Gandhism and socialism. But in the 80’s milieu his models were dated and periodised. Santanu Acharya, similarly had tried to humanize the society by the values of Vedic culture and its culture hero, Jagannath, after his disillusionment with existentialism, left-wing politics and even an experiment with rebellious humanism. He returns to spiritual humanism, mysticism and cultural nativism in his final phase. Chandrasekhar Rath offers the same cultural nativism as a panacea for human ills and the failure of civilization. Surendra Mohanty after getting disillusioned with manipulative politics in his Andha Diganta, returns like Acharya and Rath to Jagannath and the unifying principles of cultural nativism: the only difference is that he interprets history, particularly the history of Odisha during Ramachandra Deba II and refocuses on the spiritual values at the expense of power, love and society in his Nila Saila. He also heroizes aristocratic figures in a tragic mode to suggest that the morally powerful values are no more relevant in the modern society. He laments over a day that is no more and creates a cultural nihilism to symbolize his authorial intent. Thus we see that by the 80’s the mainstream Odia novel manifests a moral exhaustion bordering on
despair. The prosperity and growth which these great novelists and story-tellers had expected after Independence was nowhere in sight. The quality of life was poor; values cherished for millennia were no more legitimate in the modern society. Man was a mere self-seeking animal trying to just survive in a value-free environment which he must exploit without any qualms of conscience. The society was heroless, valuefree and manipulative, thus compelling the 80's generation of writers to search for new forms and techniques in the midst of the imported post-modernist explosion of “knowledge”.

The novels of the (so called) post-modern writers are detached from a sense of history, the fictional reality seldom rising above the contemporary and current problematics. Non-heroes and anti-heroes replace the traditional hero as no single 'hero' is capable of carrying the burden of a plot or story. The limited maneuverability of man and the localized focus of the novelists never could present universal man in the post modern context. Hence classes, groups and cross-sections of a society in cultural-moral-political disharmony became the focus in the works of the new novelists. Psychological guilt, class or group psyche and a rebellious group conflict over identity became the new passion of the postmodernists.

The major novelist of this post 80s period is Pratibha Ray, a novelist, short story writer and literary activist. She has also written travelogues and essays. She has steered clear of the hapless alienated human situation to discover human greatness and feminine grace in the myths and legends of the great epics - Ramayana and Mahabharat. Her interests are multifold, from historical periods to myths and great monuments and figures as well as the dark realities of the Bondas and other deprived segments of the society. Her range is vast and varied and her narratives too are expressive, interpretive, argumentative and at times even magical. Her first significant novel Uttara Marga (1988) is superficially a tribute to the less known freedom fighters of Jagatsinghpur area to which she belongs by birth. But she takes these little known figures to the larger scene of India’s struggle for freedom and makes them heroic, sacrificial and grand. She, however does not call her work “history”; she fictionalizes facts without the dispassionateness of a historian. The Konarka temple had always fascinated her as a monument of love, grace and architectural excellence. Her Shila Padma (Stone Lotus) is again a romance with history but the narrative techniques used here are a dramatic juxtaposition of history, symbolism and modern logic. She does not extol anything taking for granted : she rather dramatizes with built-in symbolism the facts with an eye for detail. The foreigner present in this work is exposed to the grandeur of Konark and the hoary historical background material with acceptable logic.

But her almost meteoric rise to national fame flows mostly from her Yagnaseni (Daughter of Yagnasena in the Mahabharat) which epitomizes the famed Mahabharat heroine Draupadi as a modern woman with an identity of her own. Pratibha’s Draupadi is illustrative of what she herself has said in several interviews, a sort of “humanist feminism” without the rigour or rancour of a Julia Kristeva or Luce Irigaray. This’ Draupadi is in the tradition of the classical feminine as envisaged by Vyasa and other Vedic philosophers: yet she is sophisticated, knowledgeable, well-versed in fine arts, warfare and even the dice game. She is magnanimous and self-eschewing almost transcending the milieu which she inherits. She does not display a scheming mind or a stubborn individualism even while seeking revenge for her ignominy in the royal
court of Dhritarashtra during the dice game, in which she is lost as a wager to Duryodhan. She asks like a contemporary woman the questions which disturb the ethics of the dice game and the principles of Yudhisthira’s husbandhood. Draupadi is a perfect blend of an eastern, (Indian) woman of love, sympathy, grace, selfhood and divinity. The Akshaya Patra (The Everfull Pot) in her hands during the period of the forest life of the Pandavas never leave even the birds, beasts and insects unfed. Her temper, rage, hate and disposition are so integrated that she grows out of the Vyasa frame who owns up her weaknesses and failings as a woman free, wise and subtle. Pratibha uses the epic facts and modulates them with modern feminine outlook to make her our contemporary. Her maturity as wife to the five Pandava brothers, her travails and trepidations, her regality as well as feminine grace make Pratibha’s Draupadi more ennobling than a Cleopatra without, however, the tragic mould.

Pratibha’s Mahamoha (The Great Lust) is again a bold and innovative statement on modern femininity. The Ahalya myth is given in this epic novel a transformative dimension to this myth, celebrating the free soul of Pratibha’s concept of the new woman. This novel has vast time and space, and the entire narrative is of a multisensory approach to issues and themes of the Vedic paradigm. Pratibha’s Ahalya is beautiful with a divine touch but she is not a wax doll. She is erudite, scholar and her self-esteem is beyond a parallel in contemporary Indian literature. The two persons in her life were Indra, the king of heaven and Gautam the crest jewel of Vedic learning. Ahalya however, always thought that she deserved a man like Indra, yes Indra, for her beauty, wit, erudition and awareness of reality. The cloistered life of saintly purity to which she was fated to be conjoined was an injustice to her feminity perfection. But after being sage Gautam’s wife she does not protest or rebel, and accepts the disciplines of the enclosed order of fast- penance-purity without regret or angst. The Rape of Ahalya by Indra like the western parallel of “Leda and the swan” (the rape of Leda, Helen’s mother by Zeus in the guise of a swan) is the central event in this myth. But Mahumoha reinterprets this myth by showing Ahalya as a woman with her mind in its own place, which acknowledges her feminine self with a bold statement of truth. Ahalya admits that it was not a rape, but a union of love. Indra did not force her for lust, rather it was a love-fulfillment for Ahalya. Whatever was done, it was done with Ahalya’s body and soul surrendering willingly, longingly for the first and the most graceful experience of love. She confesses that she was fulfilled as a woman. Gautam’s scholarship and his rights of husbandhood had never made Ahalya feel like a woman. But Indra makes the woman complete. The punishment that follows and the final redemption which Ramachandra gives her have also been interpreted in a modern light. The narrative in this novel is an example of the Grand Style. Vedic knowledge, the mythic frame and the bold statements of an emancipated woman have been fictionally woven into an epic tapestry. Logic, Wisdom and even an argumentative fervour have been morally refreshing and fictionally charming. Ahalya’s bold assertion of her sexuality does not compromise her feminine dignity. I think in contemporary Indian literature such a transformation of the classical feminine into a new paradigm of values has not been attempted. This is a sober yet courageous effort to deframe the rigidity of the contemporary society.

Pratibha’s novel’s are always well researched; she uses authentic reality in her fictional mode. Her anthropological research into the life of the Bonda’s in the Bonda hills of Orissa (as yet inaccessible to modern civilization) has
resulted in another masterpiece in her Adibhumi (The Primal Land). Pratibha opens up and exposes this enclosed world to the readers with a rare sympathy for the rigid value construct of these “unfortunate” people. Unfortunate because the Bondas are the victims of their own logic and belief. No Bonda (Remo) hopes to live a full life waiting for a natural termination in his closed world. The language in this novel is close to the syntax and vocabulary of the great Gopinath Mohanty. And with this language Pratibha describes the hills, valleys, fields, houses, huntings and also the family life of the Bondas. The storyline stretches from Soma Muduli the godfather of Bonda culture to the young rebel Soma Sise but in the end the rebellious youngster only succeeds in enclosing the Bondas into the same moral pattern: Soma Muduli, the octogenarian Bonda philosopher pays through his blood only to plunge the Remo in the much worshipped darkness of their lives. The efforts of government to introduce modern civilization of the plains result in trauma and tragedy without any transforming positivism.

The greatest work of Pratibha Ray is definitely her last published novel Magnamati (The Regenerative Earth, 2004). Based on the 1999 killer cyclone of Odisha which devastated the entire coastal belt of Odisha from Balasore to Gopalpur, the plot is focused on the worst hit area Ersama in the district of Jagatsinghpur. A superficial reader may confuse Magnamati with a disaster novel but it is not so, nor is it intended to be. This novel is about mother Earth and her relationship with her children, the human race, which she holds in display as she does her trees, rivers, mountains and seas. Man is sustained by this mother, nourished into his destiny. She tolerates all his naughtiness and even violence. But when man transgresses the epitomical tolerance of the mother earth; she chastises him with her demonic fury. The cyclone in this novel is symbolic of nature’s fury which she lavishes on man and his civilization with as much diabolism as she lavishes her love, kindness and divine grace on him with tender feelings. This is made clear even in the first page of the novel. To show this Pratibha very carefully builds up the entire topography, geography and gradually growing civilization in the Abhayapur- Ersama region. She creates a peopled world of villages valleys, rivers, seas tracing the history of the fisherman community to the Dasa king, who was created from the dirt from the ears of Vishnu at the time of Pralaya. She enlarges this community as the mother earth does by bringing in Bangladeshi refugees and stragglers and adventurous settlers. This community, in the novel, grows organically, spreading from one place to another, like a world full of men of all religions, languages and professions. The, focus is not on one man or community; it is on the entire region and how it grows and expands into a modern civilized unit despite primitive professions and poverty. But this community lives like a well-knit unit until modern day politics, manipulative machinations prompted by greed and lust make this world caste ridden, divided and unwieldy. Exploitation of the upper caste and the new born political caste make this world gradually unlivable and ugly. The slow rise of people from poverty by honest professions is politicized by the divide and rule policies of the political sophomores pursuing the unholy British legacy to further their individualistic ends. This world gets enlarged by people joining the Kargil war and swells by the new knowledge of global reality with the machinations of the opportunists. But life goes on superficially, festivals are observed despite religious strife and class bickering. Gradually, however the happy fabric of the proud life of the people shows symptoms of subterranean unease and misery of the innocent. Love does not fructify. Deceit thrives. Politics exploits. And
then comes the super cyclone on a day (Durga Puja) in southern coastal Odisha and a day (Laxmi Puja) on eastern Coastal Odisha in an interval of a fortnight when people expect the deities to protect them. But Durga and Laxmi turn Kali as the cyclone uproots the villages like saplings and reduces the entire area into a waste land of rotten bodies, festering animals and cringing vegetation. The tranced earth looks like a leprous face in death.

The description of the cyclone, the all devouring sea and the rivers, the efforts of men for survival as well as the burial ground silence of the murky earth are a rarity even in world literature. This world and her displayed children vanish in a trice and what remains is the dark desolation of the earth. For this devastation is not only of men and civilization: even the earth dies in her pain for having avenged the intolerable torture of the humans in a fit of anger.

But the earth regenerates. Vegetation rises again from the festering wounds. Leaves grow on the beleaguered stumps. The living move again searching for their unseen blood mates. The dead cannot be counted; their bones have gone beyond arithmetic. Slowly the sun lights up the pale, arid planes which were once peopled. The relief work goes on fattening cynical wallets. But the lesson taught by nature and the earth is, well taken by the stray survivors. They gather in makeshift tents forgetting their caste, creed and religion to create a new society. Bikram and Girima unite the stragglers into a human group to fulfill destiny’s course in a new world called Basumatipur (The world village). The tranced earth resumes the process of revival.

The novels of Pratibha Ray create a large human order of history, myth and reality. Her technique ranges from the epistolary, the dramatic and the confessional to the monologues within the frame of realism. Her worldview is one in many; unity in diversity. She considers man as divine and seriously brings out the divinity in man despite the evil in the human animals. Her world is solid, holistic and crowded by all kinds of life. Pratibha assimilates in her consciousness the variety of values which have emerged in the march of civilization. She shows that man’s divinity is a gift of nature, the essence of creation, and this essence could be polished by the challenging vicissitudes of life so that mankind can make the world their rightful home. Her language is a poetic blend of the sublime and the colloquial, which she uses in situation-specific contexts. She visualizes the human reality in the multiplex context of the mundane, the sophisticated and the divine. Her characters are identifiably real and the use of sensuous and symbolic metaphors makes her men and women palpable and perfectly human despite their angularities and naivete. Philosophy and inspired vision do not mar her novels into priestly texts of moral preaching. Her works are fiction and the fiction is rooted in reality both physical and metaphysical. Pratibha is definitely one of the most important novelists in contemporary Indian Literature.

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