

Cultural Depiction of Bihar in the Novels of Phanishwar Nath Renu

Ruby Kumari (Research Scholar)

Department of English
T.M.B.U. Bhagalpur
Bihar,
India

Abstract

Phanishwar Nath Renu (1921-1977) is a monumental figure in Indian Literature, best known for bringing the soul of rural Bihar to the forefront of Hindi fiction. He is celebrated as the architect of the regional novel genre within the Hindi literary canon. His cultural depiction is deeply rooted in the 'Aanchalikta' (Regionalism). For Renu, culture is not a static museum of traditions but a living, breathing, and often messy synthesis of folk heritage, social hierarchy, and the encroaching forces of modern politics. His novels, particularly *Maila Anchal* and *Parti Parikatha*, offer a panoramic view of the rural cultural landscape of North Bihar. He uses the region as the 'canvas' to paint a detailed cultural map of the state's north-eastern Purnia region. His depiction is famous for moving beyond the typical poverty-stricken image of Bihar to reveal a society rich in music, complex in social standing, and deeply spiritual.

Renu believed that the culture of Bihar could not be understood without its sounds and stories. In *Maila Anchal*, he identified over 20 types of Maithili song forms. He incorporated *Sohar* (birth songs), *Nachari* (wedding songs), and *Samadaun* (mourning songs) into the text. He gave a central place to local theatre forms like *Vidapath Naach* (based on *Vidyapati's* poetry) and the rhythmic beating of the *Dholak* (drum), which acted as the heartbeat of the village.

Keyword – regionalism, hierarchy, encroaching, poverty-stricken, mourning.

Introduction

Phanishwar Nath Renu stands alone in Hindi literature for his mastery of the Aanchalik (regional) novel, where the landscape itself transcends its setting to become a protagonist in its own. By weaving the social fabric and folklore of the region into the narrative, Renu elevated the 'Anchal' from a mere backdrop to a dynamic, living entity. His literary genius lies in his ability to personify the rural landscape, granting it a pulse and a voice that rivals any human character. He says,

“Parati zameen ki apni ek gandh hoti hai- udaas aur gambhir.” (The fallow land has its own scent-melancholy and solemn.) (Parati Prikatha, pg:14)

Renu's prose functions like a mirror to the land, reflecting a world where the environment itself feels, reacts and speaks. His novels '*Maila Anchal*' (1954) and '*Parati Parikatha*' (1957) function as exhaustive socio-cultural archives, meticulously documenting the myths, dialects, and complex caste hierarchies of the Kosi region. These novels constitute a literary ethnography, offering a deep-dive into the folkways, seasonal rhythms, and agrarian tensions unique to North Bihar. Describing the essence of the region he says,

“Isme phool bhi hai, shool bhi hai, dhool bhi hai, gulaab bhi hai aur keechad bhi hai.” (In this, there are flowers and thorns, dust and roses, and mud too.) (*Maila Anchal* pg:7)

In these works, Renu does not just tell a story; he compiles a living treasury of the folk-songs, superstitions, and local wisdom that define the soul of Purnea. He intricately wove the cultural tapestry of Bihar, capturing its nuances with an almost painterly precision.

Renu's prose is imbued with the sonorous rhythms of folk music, making his novels feel like a symphony of rural life. His writing possesses a lyrical cadence, where the narrative flow mimics the ebb and flow of the local folk songs. He interweaves the lyrical grace of Vidyapati's 'Padavali' with the raw vitality of kirtans and seasonal ballads like Hori and Chaiti, creating a multi-layered auditory. For his characters, folk songs act as a cathartic release, allowing the marginalised community to articulate the joys and sorrows that standard language often fails to capture. He illustrates that these melodies are the emotional shorthand of the village, turning private yearnings and collective hardships into shared lyrical experiences. Putting emphasis on hardship, he says,

“Maagh ka jaara toh baagh ko bhi thanda kar deta hai.” (The chill of month of Magh can freeze even a tiger.) (Maila Aanchal, pg: 186)

Renu does not just describe the songs; he uses the local dialect to show that the “soul” of the region is inseparable from its music. Many emotional outbursts occur during collective gatherings (Mela or Fair), where the individual's grief or joy becomes part of the village's communal rhythm. Renu suggests that when words become heavy with the burden of reality, the villager finds refuge in the lightness of a folk tune. He paints the 'Mela' as a microcosm of rural society, where the rigid boundaries of the 'tola' (caste-based neighbourhoods) temporarily soften in the shared pursuit of commerce and celebration. In his words,

“Mela toh mela hai. Yahan sirf anaaz nahin bikta, yahan afwaahen bikti hain, kisse bikte hain aur jawaani ki umangen bikti hain. Mele ki dhool me sara gaon apna dukh bhulkar naachne lagta hai”. (A fair is a fair. Here, its not just grain that is sold; rumours are sold, stories are sold, and the passions of youth are sold. In the dust of the fair, the whole village forgets its sorrow and begins to dance.)

“Jaat do hi hai- ek gareeb aur dusri ameer.” (There are only two castes- the poor and the rich.) (Maila Aanchal, pg: 108)

He masterfully depicts the fair as a sensory Kaleidoscope, capturing the dust, the noise of the 'nagada', and the vibrant trade that together form the backbone of the village's livelihood. He portrays these gatherings as social clearinghouses, where the commerce of grain and cattle was merely a backdrop to the more vital exchange of secrets, legends, and forbidden glances.

In 'Maila Aanchal', Renu hybridized the elite literary code of khadi Boli with the polyphonic sounds of rural Bihar, creating a new, inclusive linguistic identity for the Hindi novel. He subverted the rigid hegemony of modern standard Hindi by weaving a vibrant tapestry of Maithili and Bhojpuri dialects into the very fabric of his prose. By drenching khadi Boli in the local colours of Purnea, Renu proved that the 'local' could be 'universal' without losing its authentic flavour. He transformed the written word into a living recording of the Purnea district's linguistic soul by infusing his prose with regional idioms and local syntax. The dialogue in his works acts as a vocal fingerprint, uniquely identifying the characters not just by their thoughts, but by the specific dialectical textures of their everyday speech. Renu harnessed the pithy power of local aphorisms showcase a community that, while perhaps lacking formal education, possessed a razor-sharp social intelligence. He utilized the vernacular shorthand of Purnea to illustrate how rural wisdom is often wrapped in a dry, observational wit that skewers both local corruption and human folly.

A defining motif in Renu's oeuvre is the turbulent intersection where primary primordial folklore and ancestral superstitions collide with the cold, bureaucratic machinery of the modern state. In his famous short

story 'Teesri Kasam', the protagonist Hiranman, a simple bullock cart driver, sings 'Birha' songs to deal with his loneliness and his unspoken love for the folk-dancer Hirabai. The songs are filled with metaphors of the "bird leaving the cage" or the "river changing its course". He masterfully chronicles the socio-cultural fictions generated as the ancient, organic rhythms of village life are disrupted by the clinical arrival of hospitals, schools, and political parties.

Renu depicts Bihar as a liminal space, caught in a tug-of-war between the haunting pull of local myths and the pragmatic promises of post-independence institutionalism. His narratives serve as a literary autopsy of change, dissecting the unease and irony that emerge when the 'modern' tries to take root in a soil saturated with ancient custom. He captures the existential vertigo of a community forced to navigate the arrival of the microscope and the ballot box while still deeply anchored in the world of ghosts and goddesses. He portrays the modern institution not as a saviour, but as a foreign graft on an old body - sometimes healing it, but often causing a feverish rejection from the traditional social structure.

In 'Maila Aanchal', the arrival of Dr. Prashant serves as the perfect catalyst for the clash between 'ancient' and 'modern'. Dr. Prashant represents the 'modern' (science, medicine, and rationalism) entering a world governed by the 'ancient' (superstition, caste hierarchy, and folklore).

In Phanishwar Nath Renu's literary world, women and nature are not just background elements; they are vessels of the region's spiritual and physical resilience. He depicts them with a "raw authenticity" that avoids the typical romanticization found in earlier Hindi Literature. His female characters are often the moral and emotional anchors of a village fractured by caste and politics. They embody both the suffering and the quiet rebellion of rural Bihar. In Maila Aanchal, Mamta, an educated, compassionate nurse who acts as a foil to the village's superstitions. She represents the "healing touch" that Bihar desperately needed post-independence. Another character is Kamla who represents the intersection of vulnerability and purity. Her relationship with Dr. Prashant is one of the most tender arcs in the novel, showcasing a woman's ability to find love amidst the "mud" of social decay.

In Parti Parikatha, the Kosi river is the dominant force. Renu personifies it through local myths to explain the geographical reality of North Bihar (Kosi Maiyaa jab roothati hain, toh gaon-ke-gaon ujar deti hain.) (When Mother Kosi is angry, she wipes out entire villages.) Here Renu uses the myth of a goddess escaping her "evil in-laws" to explain the volatile flooding patterns. This turns a natural disaster into a cultural narrative.

Renu's famous short story 'Maare gaye Gulfam', popularly known by its film title 'Teesri Kasam', the depiction of Bihar is a lyrical blend of rural innocence and the fading glory of traditional folk arts. The central cultural element is the 'Nautanki' (folk theatre). He portrays it not just as entertainment, but as a complex social world. Through the character of Hirabai, Renu shows the dual reality of a Nautanki dancer- celebrated as a 'fairy' or 'goddess' on stage, but stigmatized as a "public woman in real life". For the rural audience, the Nautanki is a transformative experience. Hiranman's devotion to Hirabai begins because he cannot separate her stage persona from her actual self; to him, she is as pure as the characters she portrays. Hiranman sings the song of Mahua, a girl sold by her cruel mother to a merchant. This legend provides a cultural framework for the relationship between Hiranman and Hirabai. It highlights themes of displacement, sale of women, and the silent suffering that was grim reality in rural pockets of Bihar. Renu meticulously depicts the culture of the road. Hiranman's vows (kasams) not to carry bamboo, not to carry stolen goods, and finally, not to carry a 'company women'- represent the moral compass of a simple village man. The bullock cart is treated with ritualistic care. Renu describes the bells, the colourful threads, and the 'conversation' Hiranman has with his bullocks as part of deep-rooted agrarian culture. The story is rich with the local Dehati (rural) dialect. Renu 'Bihar-izes' the language to reflect the rustic mind. Hiranman describes Hirabai as 'Champa ka Phool'

(Champak flower) or a ‘Pari’ (fairy). Words are twisted to suit the local tongue, such as ‘Mita’ (friend) or ‘Circus’ pronounced in a distinct rural lilt.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, Renu's depiction of Bihar is a profound study of a society in flux. His work stands as a monumental bridge between the forgotten rural interior and the mainstream literary consciousness. By refusing to sanitize the language or the life of Purnea, he ensured that the ‘soil-scented’ reality of the village - with all its vibrant folk songs, sharp-witted sarcasm, and painful traditions - remained etched in the heart of Indian modernism. His stories serve as a timeless reminder that progress is never a simple linear path; rather, it is a messy, beautiful, and often tragic dialogue between the ancient myths we carry in our hearts and the modern institutions we build for our future. His greatest triumph was the liberation of the Hindi novel from the constraints of formal Khadi Boli.

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