

# Basanti: A Critical Analysis

Dr. Krishnaprada Dash

Head, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, DRIEMS Autonomous Engineering College, Odisha, India

## ABSTRACT

A group of twelve authors collaborated to write *Basanti*. It was a brand-new test. The Bengali novel *Baroyari*, which was co-authored by twelve authors and enjoyed considerable success, served as an inspiration for the *Sabuja Sahitya Samiti's* decision to co-author an Odia novel. The first chapter of the book *Basanti* was published in the *Utkala Sahitya* periodical in May 1924, and the thirtieth chapter was published in November 1926. The *Sabuja Sahitya Samiti* published it as a novel five years later, in 1931. Before *Basanti*, a lengthy poem in Odia called "Janha Mamu," based on the Moon and authored by twelve poets was also successfully published in between 1902–1903. Prior to that, the first attempt in collaborative writing in Odia literature was made in 1894. The book was called *Parijata Mala*, and it was a lengthy poetry that covered all the six seasons. That poem was written by three poets, each of whom focused on two seasons. "Chandrama Sharire Eha Nuhen Kalanka," another effort in collaborative authorship was attempted in the year 1899–1900. However, that was not published as a book. *Basanti* then appeared as a unique experiment. At that time, the Bengali novel *Baroyari* was released. Inspired by *Baroyari*, the authors of *Basanti* tried their hand at Odia writing and found it a great success.

**Keyword :** - *Basanti, Novel, Feminism, Translation, Odia*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Basanti* is a collaboratively created novel that differs from previous novels in execution and approach. The goal of this study is to illustrate many ideas and aspects used in *Basanti*. According to the text *Basanti* is the most beautiful woman ever. She possesses all the virtues and is the picture of endurance, love, patience, and care. Even though she is educated and raised in a contemporary home, she has never exhibited shame or haughtiness while residing with Debabrata's family in a village. She has a lovely appearance with an ability to handle everything with the highest seriousness. She is troubled internally, but she never shows it. From the maids and servants to her own family, she has demonstrated the utmost concern and care for everyone. She has also said that she is the cause for Debabrata's misery despite her unwavering love for him. She has never expressed any melancholy, not even to her husband or mother-in-law. She has embraced every stage of life with positivity, and despite significant challenges and misunderstandings, her love for Debabrata endures. She has defied education and the independence of women. She is adept at defending her dignity. She is a caring wife, a committed daughter-in-law, a sensitive daughter, and a loyal friend. *Basanti* is the protagonist of the book who is indeed blessed with heroic traits, so the authors had good reason to name the book *Basanti*.

## 2. OBJECTIVES

The novel has justified the following issues through its plots and characters:

### 2.1 Concept of Feminism:

*Basanti* exhibits the concept of feminism much before this concept emerged as a movement in European literature. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* was published in 1949 while this text was published in 1931. The newness of thought regarding women liberation and education, which this novel has portrayed, was a very arduous task during pre-independent Odisha. *Basanti*, as a character, has given voice to the subjugated women of rural Odisha. Her aim to strive for complete freedom and education of women is clearly reflected in the text while she intends to open a school along with Nisha, a young girl, going against the orthodox beliefs of the rural Odisha. Moreover, when she writes an article on the liberation of women she even does not hesitate to have a heated discussion with Debabrata

on this issue. Debabrata, who is a very kind-hearted, intelligent, dynamic, young and hardworking character, has striven much for the social issues. He himself has worked for women emancipation. But he cannot tolerate when his wife takes a stand for it. He wants her to be submissive for the smooth marital life. Though *Basanti* as a text has reflected the issue of feminism, but the move is not radical. To maintain radicalism in the society was quite impossible for any individual during that period of pre independence. Swimming against the current is an arduous task. The writer has to compromise with the thought that the society will accept. If the society does not accept, the book will not be accepted by the readers for whom the writer writes. So, the radical elements in *Basanti* have often been toned down in the text.

*Basanti* can be regarded as a feministic novel as all the major characters struggle for woman emancipation. Feminism as a movement did not begin in the 1930s, but *Basanti* foreshadows the movement towards feminism. When strict restrictions were imposed on Basanti, the heroine of the novel, she has not restricted herself to the four walls of the room. On the other hand, she has taken lots of steps to improve the status of women by creating organisations and schools to impart education. Being a devoted wife, she has made many sacrifices in performing the domestic duties, but still she has come out of that typical society to bring reformation for which she has gone through lots of abuse by her husband and villagers. This even leads to her separation from Debabrata, her husband. But still the separation has not changed her spirit. The young girl Nishamani, Kalyani Devi and Nirmala Devi are motivated by the modern spirit. They struggle a lot to bring equality and to give the rightful status to women in the society.

## 2.2 Autobiographical Sketch:

As the title suggests the whole novel is centred on the life-story of Basanti. As argued by critics it is the autobiography of Sarala Devi. Sarala Devi has written the major portions of the novel and it is assumed by many a critics that this novel is her autobiographical work. Sachidananda Mohanty exhaustively writes about the significant events relating to Sarala Devi's life and they find a clear reflection in the novel *Basanti*. Sarala Devi's relationship with her husband is analogous to Basanti's relationship with Debabrata. The advocacy of woman emancipation in theory found a place in Sarala Devi's husband as in the case of Debabrata, Basanti's husband, but both of them fail when it comes as a test in their own lives. Annada Shankar Ray, in his book in Bengali titled *Jibon Jouban*, has clearly illustrated that *Basanti* is the autobiographical novel of Sarala Devi. Frieda Hauswirth, in her autobiography *A Marriage to India*, has narrated the life of Sarala Devi. This book attempts to show that Sarala Devi and Basanti are one and same person. This book shows how a woman tries to come out of the home to serve the society. Sarala Devi was the first Odia feminist and the first lady to come out of the stereotyped society. In the book *The Lost World of Sarala Devi* Sachidananda Mohanty mentions:

Sarala's interest in the gender question continues in her novel as well. In her portion of this jointly written novel *Basanti*, she continues to regard literature primarily as a means of female emancipation and social information. In *Basanti* the mode of dialogue between Braja and Basanti is potential in nature and centers on the question of the role of women within and outside the institution of marriage, the need for female education and her participation in the civic and political life. (14)

## 2.3 Christian Missionaries and their Preaching:

During that time Christian Missionaries were there to preach their religion. The women of that time were highly subjugated and dominated. Only the Christian women and the Missionaries were well educated, possessing modern beliefs. Kalyani Devi and her daughter Sunitee also belong to the Christian society. During the marriage of Ramesh and Sunitee, which was an inter-religion marriage, Kalyani Devi has faced lots of difficulties while confronting the Bishops and the Missionaries. But she has lashed out at them while proving that God is beyond and above all the discriminations relating to caste and religion. Basanti was also criticised and taunted as a Christian lady by her mother-in-law for her education and city life-style. During that era the Christian missionaries were spreading women education and the concept of liberation which are clearly reflected in the novel. This novel is a graphic picture of that contemporary society.

## 2.4 Adaptation of Epistolary Technique:

Some of the chapters of this novel are written in the epistolary form where the characters exchange their emotions through letters. Debabrata writes a letter to Kalyani Devi to convey his concern for Basanti in Chapter Six. In

Chapter Twenty One Basanti writes a letter to her friend Sunitee, expressing her pain and suffering in her marital life. In Chapter Twenty Six Basanti writes another letter to Sunitee after her separation from Debabrata. Debabrata writes a letter to Ramesh in Chapter Twenty Six after realising his error of driving Basanti out of his life.

### 2.5 Reflection of Inner-Self through Writing Diary:

In Chapters Fifteen and Sixteen both Basanti and Debabrata have reflected their inner selves through their diary. Both of them have expressed their agony, realisation and love for each other in their own ways. From their diaries we come to know about their own self and their true nature is revealed. These two chapters are very essential and effective parts of the entire novel. They have released their frustrations in the surface level and the love and concern in a deeper way are also revealed.

### 2.6 Exclusive Use of Odia *Dhaga* (Proverb):

*Dhaga* is a very colloquial term. Usually this is an ornamentation of the Odia language. Basically, in the rural areas people use ample of *dhaga* in order to convey some meaning in a satirical way. These Odia proverbs are exclusively used here in order to provide that typical original effect of rural culture and through the characters of Saniamaa mother and Debabrata's mother the writers have used a number of Odia proverbs to showcase the in depth meaning of certain conversations.

### 2.7 A Well-Knit Plot:

Though this novel is written with the collaborative effort of twelve writers, the plot of the entire novel is a well-knit one that captures the attention of the readers from the beginning to the end. They all have maintained the same streamline and it seems as if one single thought of one individual writer is reflected. There is no intrigue, conspiracy and twist to make it a complicated one. The entire story revolves around both Basanti and Debabrata, their love, marriage, union, suffering, depression, separation, self-realisation, belongingness, curiosity and reunion. The plot runs very smoothly which has a perfect ending for the readers in spite of showing many ups and downs.

### 2.8 Reflection of Odia Rural Culture and Life Style:

One can truly visualise the picture of the rural Odia culture from this novel itself. When Basanti enters the village with Debabrata after her marriage the way she was judged and commented by the fellow villagers, specially the village women, reflect the typical attitude of the then rural Odisha. In Chapter Seventeen at the bathing *ghat*, the conversation of the village women in a group reveals the true village picture. The zamindars are always placed in high esteem in the village areas. The same is shown in case of Debabrata's mother whom everybody respects and obeys. They might throw tormenting words at her back but no one will dare speak ill at her face.

## 3. CONCLUSIONS

*Basanti* is an experiment written by twelve authors together, and it was successful as a novel produced through teamwork. From 1924 to 1931, it first appeared as chapters in the Odia periodical *Utkala Sahitya*. It changed into a text in 1931 that only listed the names of nine authors, with the other three names being used as pseudonyms. The entire work is built on a single streamlining, and even though each author wrote a different chapter, they all managed to keep the plot flowing in the right order despite not writing in serial form.

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