
Reconstruction of the Subversive History of the Marginalized in Two Contemporary Bangla Novels

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Abstract

Search of cultural roots of the marginalized is also a recurrent theme in the alternative Bangla novels. This is in a way to reconstruct the subversive history of the marginalized. In the mainstream elitist literature including Bangla novels no genuine attempt was so far made to record the cultural histories of the marginalized people as the Bajikars, the Santals, the Kakmaras, the Mundas, the Bouris, the Shabars and the like. Most of the novels under our critical perusal are in a way planned attempts to reconstruct the cultural histories of the marginalized.

Keywords- *marginalization, Bajikar, culture, other, Santal*

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Introduction

Search of cultural roots of the marginalized is a recurrent theme in the world of fictional art, especially in the novels of the once colonized countries. In numerous novels by the Latin American novelists and in those by the writers of the African countries such a quest for cultural roots frequents. The search for cultural identity is one of the fundamental concerns in the majority of significant works of African fiction writers and hence occupies a central place in the writers' quest for exposing the authentic African personality and the pressing influences on the psyche. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Nadine Gordimer, Amos Tutuola, Ben Okri and many others can be seen to develop a fictional poetics based on African reality and African identity in all its complexities and political-racial compulsions.

Search of cultural roots of the marginalized is also a recurrent theme in the alternative Bangla novels. This is in a way to reconstruct the subversive history of the marginalized. In the mainstream elitist literature including Bangla novels no genuine attempt was so far made to record the cultural histories of the marginalized people as the Bajikars, the Santals, the Kakmaras, the Mundas, the Bouris, the Shabars and the like. Most of the novels under our critical perusal are in a way planned attempts to reconstruct the cultural histories of the marginalized. The streamlined stories are not given sole importance here. The novels are important for documenting the cultural roots and cultural transformation of the marginalized communities. The novels should be considered as important literary pieces because of both of their fictional art as well as their documentary value.

In these novels we get a documentation of the hitherto unrecorded history of the subaltern tribes. The mainstream Bangla novels have been bogged in the self-possessed world of the urban and semi-urban middle classes who do not suffer from hunger and poverty but have been possessed by the ghosts of unsatisfied and troubled sexual life. The off-beat novels here under our critical purview have not only radically challenged the parochial thematic world of the traditional Bangla novels but also extended the geographical periphery of the Bangla novels. The centralism of urbanity which is a recurrent theme in the main stream Bangla novels has been replaced with the rural India which is the real India. The India which has been advertised to the foreign tourists and has been imagined as our Indian nation is unknown and alien to these tribal people. The glitz of the much advertised 'imagined nationality' does not make them proud of at all. The subaltern novels have some attempts to explore the unknown India under the covers of discrimination and negligence of Indian nationalist and elitist historians.

In *Rahu Chandaler Harh* (1982), translated into English by Papri Sri Raman as *Magic Bones*, published in 1992 jointly by Abhinav Publications, New Delhi, and Facet Books International, New York Abhijit Sen has looked for cultural roots of the Bajikars and reconstructed the history of the Bajikar

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community on the basis of oral components of culture. Rahu perhaps was their ancient ancestor. The magic wand made of Rahu's bone was their mysterious source of power, which created enchantment and sorcery. The Bajikars were one such wandering race. In a few villages of northern part of Bengal a few gypsies still fight to establish themselves as peasant man. Time gradually obscures memory. The new generation does not perhaps know that they might have originally belonged to a territory of northern or western part of India where they had a separate language and alien rituals, systems and habits. Shariba collects the past of the Bajikars from his Grand Mother's songs, tales and a story of continuous struggle for existence. It's a tale of five generations which began 150 years ago at the time of Pitem, the Great-Great Grand Father of Shariba. It includes, very naturally, many ups and downs of the region which have their reference in those of the entire country for one and a half century. Pitem wished that his race would cease to be a wandering band of gypsies and transform into a race of peasant man. And after five generations Shariba still carries out the legacy. In the novel Abhijit Sen also explored the cultural relations of the Bajikars with other subaltern communities as the Goalas, the Namashudras and the Machhmaras. From time immemorial the Bajikars have been wandering in search of a piece of land for settlement. But the social, political and economic system of the country is such that they are not permitted to do so. In this vast country they have no land to build up a house, no land to cultivate for livelihood. Abhijit Sen's novel *Rahu Chandaler Harh* is a document of this unfortunate wandering tribe. Akhtaruzzaman Elias says:

The mainstream men are isolated. The bourgeois society emerges beating the drums of individual liberty. With the development of this society, dependent on other people's labour this much advertized liberty takes the form of individualism and now it ends in the form of self-centeredness by jumping into the all-devouring hunger of capitalism. Now that individualism can be called exclusive individual-interest. The society which is marked exclusively by individual interests, create the art which gradually gets damped in the self-mourning of a rickety sickly individual. This sickly individual is hollow inwardly. Abhijit Sen does not attempt to write a story of this hollow and coreless individual. (139) (Translation mine)

The plot of *Rahu Chandaler Harh* (1982) is not a straight forward narrative. History, myths, folklores and anecdotes collaborate to form a narrative that defies the definitive form of the traditional novel, having a clear cut beginning, a climatic middle part and a satisfactorily conclusive end. The novel begins in the manner of a folktale. Lubini introduces Shariba to the cultural history of the Bajikars. Tapodhir Bhattacharya observes:

The microcosm of 'Rahu Chandaler Harh' reminds us of the Latin American magic realism that proposes an alternative narrative-structure, challenging modern realism. In thematic

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pattern, form and application Abhijit Sen, as if, wishes to reject the incompleteness of pseudo-realism. He has looked for such a complete neo-realism that can easily assimilate magic consciousness. As long stored up archetypal memories remain dormant in apparently miraculous cultural components, he uses details of the life of a community as the threads of his narrative. (210-11) (Translation mine)

Rahu Chandaler Harh is an exceptional Bangla novel which introduces the hitherto unknown cultural and social life of the Bajikars. It certainly extends the periphery of contemporary alternative Bangla fictions. *Mahulbanir Sereng* (1995) by Tapan Bandopadhyay is another novel which brings out an intimate picture of the Santal life. The novel has been written with the contemporary Jharkhand Movement in the backdrop. The movement produced enough heat in different parts of the Jangalmahal part of West Bengal. So, the political components in the novel are equally important with the cultural ones in it. Born in 1947 Tapan Bandopadhyay who worked as a Sub-divisional Officer in the Santal populated district of the then undivided Midnapur has adequate knowledge of the Santal life, language and culture. The book *Santali Kabita, a collection of Santal Songs into Bangla* (1976) under his editorship bears the stamp of his scholarship in the Santal culture. His intimate knowledge of the Santal culture has got a distinct reflection in his novel *Mahulbanir Sereng* (1995). Not only his knowledge of culture but also his knowledge of the Santal language has made the narrative refreshing in a number of ways.

The narrative of *Mahulbanir Sereng* (1995) revolves around the accidental relationship a Santal married woman Saheli and Alaktak Roy, a city-bred young doctor who has recently joined the small Government health centre in the village Mahulbani. The young doctor fell in love with the simple minded tribal people. He served sincerely the poverty stricken and socially neglected people and soon became a dear friend of most of the men and women. His love and sincerity touched the hearts of the Santals who have been so far habituated to see hatred and refusal in the eyes of the educated and elitist 'deku' (non-Santal) people. People who were suspicious of the doctor's goodness were Ramu Ojha, Hardeb Mukhia and the like who wish the society to remain bogged in superstitions so that they can continue to enjoy their social dominance and economic exploitation in the society. It is to be noted that even in the Santal community different power centers operate in different forms. In the novel Tapan Bandopadhyay has delved deep into the socio-economic complexities of the Santal society and have not indulged in any attempt of idealizing the primitive simplicity which the tourists often do.

Saheli has been issueless though she has long been married to Aghor. Aghor, a police constable stays out of hometown and in the mean time Saheli gets closer with the new young doctor of their village. On a night of festival Saheli, drunken with 'handiya' and 'madkam', two types of liquors the Santals are very fond of

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intoxicated the young doctor and they copulated. When Aghore came back, he get the news the Saheli is pregnant. He becomes very happy and thankful to the doctor with this belief that the doctor has medically cured Saheli of infertility. All the village men claim that the baby is the doctor's and not of Aghore. Aghore tries to argue in favour of innocence of his wife and the doctor. But the villagers have not been convinced. Dako, a woman of some mental strength tried to save the doctor. Once the Hardeb Mukhia had a secret physical relationship with Dako on the of Kajal's marriage when Dako went into a forest in search of flowers. Dako threatened the Mukhia of revealing the sexual secret to the villagers if he would not stop working upon the villagers against the doctor and Saheli. But Dako had to pay a high price for challenging the Mukhia who along with Ramu, the Ojha branded her a witch and excited the superstitious people to kill her.

The writer here explores that witch hunting is not an outcome of superstitions but an act that is conditioned by a number of socio-economic factors and gender discriminations. Dako seemed to be a potential threat to the image and authority of the Mukhia and so she had to face a dire consequence.

Extramarital relationship within the Santal community is permissible. But adultery is considered a grave offence when a Santal woman is found in relationship with a Deku male. So a 'Gira', a great gathering of Santal people of the adjoining Santal villages where the headmen of the ten villages pass judgment on a severe offence was convened. It was naturally expected to give death sentence to Saheli and the doctor. But the local Sub-divisional Officer rescued the doctor to safety. Saheli committed suicide.

A number of small sub-plots have been interwoven within the main plot. Sahadeb, an educated young man of the village Mahulbani gets involved with the Jharkhand Movement which demands a separate state for the tribal people. This movement was not merely an idealistic search for cultural roots but a strong political movement for ensuring political power to uphold the cultural identity of the tribal people. Sahadeb symbolizes the spirit of new awakening in the Santal youth. His love for Parija did not get materialized but this emotional loss got him prepared for a greater cause of liberating the Santals from exploitations and discriminations of the upper caste people.

In Bangla there have been a number of novels which refer to the Santal culture. But in most cases the Santals have been misunderstood and their culture has been depicted to be ribald sexuality and promiscuity. Tapan Sanyal writes:

Here it is worth mentioning that in the part of modern fictions on the Adibasi life; especially the writings on the Santals are exclusively based on the man-woman relation. All these writings are full of physical and sexual details. (140) (Translation mine)

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The character of Parjan, the old man is very significant. He often seems to be a choric figure in the novel. He recounts the Santal folktales and folksongs as well as narrates the stories of cultural rituals and those of gods and goddesses. The writer informs:

The old Parjan is entitled to look after the young boys and girls of the village, so that they learn the Adibasi rituals and listen to about them. But as he is old, the young boys and girls avoid him. They do not have any urge of learning the Santal ways of life. The old man threatens them with blood-shot eyes, you do not do it right. *Marangburu's* eyes see you. If you do not learn the rituals, *Bonga* will get displeased. (14) (Translation mine)

Memory is an important component of culture. Parjan's effort is directed to save the Santal culture from effacement due to the onslaught of modernization and continuous encounters with other cultures. Sahadeb and Parjan are two persons of different wavelength of consciousness but somewhere they meet together. Sahadeb knows that only political power and a separate state can fulfill the aspirations of the Santals. Parjan believes that cultural amnesia is the final death of a community. No amount of economic development can save the Santals if they are culturally uprooted.

Uses of tribal myths, myths of the marginalized and references to various cultural practices have added new dimension to these novels. Introduction of archetypes, local folklore, anecdotes and oral history contribute to the profound riches of the novels. These techniques are not forcefully imposed for foregrounding and ornamentation; rather they are integrated into the narrative structure organically. In *Mahulbanir Sereng* numerous Santal myths, folktales and folksongs have been interwoven into the structure of the novel. Though the relation between Alaktak and Saheli is an important part of the story, it is not a story of two or three individual. It is a story of collective representation of the Santal culture. The old 'Parjan' narrates these stories to the young boys and girls to build a resistance to the invasion of the dominant 'Diku', the alien to them. Sanatan, the young Santal man wants to build up political resistance what Parjan tries achieving 'through commemoration of the golden past.

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