

## **Redefining Masculinity: A Cultural Study of Kabita Singha's *Pourush***

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### **Abstract**

Kabita Singha (1931–1999) a Bangla poet, novelist and feminist thinker was born into a literary family. She worked for some years as a schoolteacher before joining the West Bengal government as an editor. In 1965 she joined AIR. In 1981, she was invited to the Iowa International Writer's Workshop. Although Kabita Singha is primarily known for her poetry, she authored a number of important novels in Bangla. Some of her novels are *Charjan Ragi Jubati* (1956), *Ekti Kharap Meyer Galpo* (1958), *Nayika Pratinayika* (1960) and *Pourush* (1984). Kabita Singha steps out of the age old concept of masculinity and asserts that 'pourush' is not an attribute of a particular gender but any individual irrespective of his or her sex, religion, education and social position does have the scope of achieving and proving this quality.

**Keywords-** *Masculinity, Feminist, Contemporary, Tradition, Culture, Resistance*

## Introduction

In *Pourush* (1984) Kabita Singha has attempted to redefine 'pourush' (masculinity). It is a popular belief that courage, strength and readiness to accept challenge are the qualities of 'pourush' and all these are attributed to a 'purush' (a male one). Kabita Singha has defied this definition of masculinity. She thinks that this reductionist concept of masculinity is a male construct and not free of parochialism and lack of knowledge of social realism. The male-dominated society equates masculinity with the combination of authority and control. In an essay '*An Introduction to Female Masculinity: Masculinity without Men*' Judith Halberstam (born as Jack Halberstam in 1961), a Professor of American Studies and Ethnicity, Gender Studies, and Comparative Literature, as well as serving as the Director of The Center for Feminist Research at University of Southern California writes:

Masculinity in this society inevitably conjures up notions of power and legitimacy and privilege; it often symbolically refers to the power of the state and to uneven distribution of wealth. Masculinity seems to extend outward into patriarchy and inward into the family; masculinity represents the power of inheritance, the consequences of the traffic in women, and the promise of social privilege. (Adams and Savran: 2002:356)

The novel can roughly be delineated as the story of mental growth of three important characters -- Sarala, a widow, Shibnath, the fiancé of Sarala and Sakhisona, a *hijra* (transgender). The Bangla word '*hijra*' a negative term is fraught with contempt, ridicule and elimination. The word 'abamanab' (sub-human), a coinage by now Manababi Bandopadhyay after sex change, (born as Somnath Bandopadhyay, an active crusader in the movements for transgender in West Bengal) cannot shake off this negative connotation. It is a popular notion that one whose sex orientation is otherwise is abnormal and devoid of any good human qualities, physical and mental. Kabita Singha has addressed a number of issues related to gender discrimination in her novel.

Sarala got married to Bijay but her married life was drastically limited because of Bijay's demise after four years of their marriage. She got a job on the compensatory ground in the same office where her husband used to work. Her in-laws care for her hard earned money but do not bother about her well being. After her husband's untimely demise her life has been decimated. She has given up cosmetics and other paraphernalia which a married Hindu Bangali woman is generally used to. Not only that. Fish, onions, mutton and lentils which she was fond of have disappeared from her dish permanently. The society has prescribed that a widow must subject her life to this life of sacrifices though a widower does not have to follow any prescription of such type. The gender discrimination is very obvious.

Sarala now understands that she was exclusively her husband's possessed property. While travelling in buses and trams Sarala used to see her husband reacting strongly to the ones who tried to touch or be physically close to her. Sarala now realizes that Bijay's reactions were prompted not always out of his concern for Sarala's modesty and discomfort but out of fear and insecurity of his authority and male ego challenged. The job gives Sarala some liberty of coming out of her claustrophobic world and interacting with the world outside. A change in her mind initiates a change in her physical appearance with dress and cosmetics back to her life. And on the way to and back from her office she comes across and gradually gets close to Shibnath and Sakhisona. Sakhisona makes her understand that her life is not finished. Sarala holds fast to dreams and learn to reevaluate her life. She falls in love with Shibnath passionately. One day she was found to be physically intimate with Shibnath in a public place at Maidan in the evening. The police inspector, on duty castigates Sarala severely. The writer captures the moment of Sarala's embarrassment and Shibnath's cowardice:

Now the inspector turned to Shibnath. In darkness the man's square face looked cruel. As no light fell on his face, the combination of his nose, chin and cap corners seemed frightening to Shibnath. In a rough voice he asked:

"What, what is your relation with this woman?"

Shibnath suddenly uttered as if unknowingly:

None, she is none to me. No relation with her. Let me go kindly. I promise not to commit such things again. A great wrong I have done. Please have mercy on me.

Suddenly Sarala broke into a cry, a harsh cry of a speechless animal. Never Shibnath knew that a cry could hear like a roar of a hoarse voice of an angry man.

While crying Sarala fell down at the inspector's feet and implored:

Please, do not take me to the police station. A poor widow I am. My father-in-law, my mother-in-law and my brother-in-law are there at my place. If any police case is filed, I will lose my social face, and even my job. I bow down to your feet, I beg your mercy.

The inspector said:

You're a widow, what a shame! Did you not come to remember the face of your deceased husband when you were doing such nasty things?

With a posture of a kick the inspector moved away from Sarala's touch. And he said:

Go, go away. Be off from my sight. I feel indignant to look at you. Be off. . (Singha: 1984:152)

(Translation: Mine)

Shibnath's timidity and his disowning their relationship shocked Sarala and led her to an utter dismay and indignation. She decided ultimately to terminate the relationship. But she returned again to Shibnath being persuaded by Sakhisona. And from her futile attempt of building up a sexual relationship with the office boss, Choudhuri Sahib she could understand that she too was not without limitations. Sarala continued to grow up as a woman as well as an understanding human being. She came to understand the sufferings of people around her. She feels compassion for Sakhisona and others belonging to his/her group. This growth within, attained through the vicissitudes of life is in a way an attainment of 'pourush'.

The portrayal of Sakhisona, the transgender in the novel is intimate and realistic. Sakhisona's mother tried to conceal her/his identity of being a 'hijra'. But she succeeded temporarily. A group of 'hijras' took Sakhisona away from his/her parents. As he/she is a 'hijra', he/she does not have the right to the parental property and to live in the family. If one is born as a 'hijra', one is an 'other' / a subaltern subject to social and economic discrimination. A hijra's life is a life of neglect, poverty and insecurity. At the end of a day's hardship, hunger, neglect and ridicule Sakhisona felt a hijra's life is much more degrading than that of a '*song* or *bhand*' (a joker or a trickster). Sakhisona questions the value of identity exclusively based on one's sexual organ. Sakhisona asks:

Is this life? In my life time I will free myself from this life. Why is only this body true? Is only this body? The mind has no value. Dhimati, you have fled, I'll also do it.  
(Singha: 1984: 118) (Translation: Mine)

Sakhisona left the hijra group and dreamt of a loving conjugal family life with Lakshman, the man Sakhisona fell in love with. But as Lakshman deserted Sakhisona and got married to Sumati as she had the ability to conceive his child. Sakhisona suffered cruelty and hatred of the society. Sakhisona returned to the hijra group again. Sarala could not accept Sakhisona's comeback. She considered it be a defeat. She expected otherwise. But Sakhisona considered it to be the beginning of much difficult crusade against social discrimination against the transgender community. Hearing Sarala's comment Sakhisona turned back and said:

No didimoni, no madam. I've not got defeated. I am not fleeing. I could not fight alone. So, I am going back to the fold. I am going back to make a comeback. In our 'akhra' (stay) the old one, Dhimati gave me this teaching. He/she died. I too shall return to the akhra and give teachings. If I grow old and die, other Sakhisonas will not die. Perhaps each and everyone will not return. One or two will realize it and break away from the fold. One, two, three, and then many more will come together. Then you will accept us and include us. You will not keep us in isolation...  
(Singha: 1984: 208) (Translation: Mine)

Sakhisona knew his/her limitations but could teach Sarala the value of being a woman and inspired Shibnath to shake off timidity to achieve 'pourush' by responding to the demands of the society. From the very childhood Shibnath was effeminate. He was never respected or given any importance in the family, in the office or in any social gathering. He was a butt of ridicule because of his soft personality. He was considered to be 'a meyechehele' (a woman), an indignant term for a man. It exposes the social inclination towards the spirit of manliness. It is a typical construct of 'pourush' that emphasizes physical power irrespective of any moral or ethical values. Shibnath could not stand by Sarala when the police inspector found them together in darkness at Maidan. But he could come out of the strong grip of cowardice when he found Himadri being attacked by the hired goons as Himadri exposed the corruption of the leading members of his office union. At the beginning he stood perplexed. But when Sakhisona cried out a strong protest, Shibnath plunged among the goons to save Himadri. He underwent a change in him. He wiped his lifelong stigma of being an effeminate. He achieved 'pourush' in the truest sense. He achieved a sense of liberty. Sakhisona's earnest call to Shibnath to save Himadri being attacked by the hired goons transformed Shibnath. He got himself into scuffle risking his life. Sakhisona was amazed to see this transformation. Sakhisona observes:

... the babu has shaken off forcibly as if a cloth-sheet, or a knot or a slough from his own body. Then he as if a fire band, sharp and shining as a silver piece ran to the crowd. (Singha: 1999:187-188) (Translation: Mine)

Shibnath got injured and was hospitalized. Himadri got killed in the scuffle. But Shibnath did not get intimidated and was determined for a battle for justice to the demised soul of Himadri who risked his life to fight against corruption. So when Sarala came to visit him in the hospital, he shared his future plan with her:

But I'm living. I have not died. They have not managed to take away all papers of Himadri. Some of the papers are with me. I will hand over all those to the policemen. They may come to visit me with smile, with packets of sweets and may lure me with the prospect of promotion. Some papers are with me. Samiran does not have this knowledge. Goutam does not have it. I'll hand over everything to the policemen. In the court I shall reveal all that I have seen and that have happened... (Singha: 1984: 213)

Throughout the novel *Pourush* (1984) Kabita Singh Kabita Singha has attempted to redefine the concept 'pourush'. The position of a woman in our society is that of the subaltern. And a widow is marginalized to the extreme. The 'widowhood' is a social construct. Every widow is compelled to conform to this stereotype. Any attempt of stepping out of this stereotype is considered a potential threat to the social authority. Sarala is stigmatized when she attempts this step out. Shibnath is subject

to neglect and ridicule and branded as a 'meyechhele' (an effeminate) because of his soft personality which is regarded as a defect in a male one. And this concept is upheld and propagated in such a way most of the women including Shibnath's aunt believed this to be true. So, each and every woman around him regarded his personality lacking. He is also a subaltern in a society where cruelty, physical force and harshness are equated with 'pourush' and celebrated. Only Sakhisona thought otherwise and discovered another self within him. Sakhisona was also a subaltern. He is a hijra, a transgender and deprived of everything. He/she is forced to live on the margin of the society. In our culture a male with his manliness is in the hegemonic position. Our culture excludes that does not fit to 'the cultural construct' after the dictation of the dominant male agencies. Kabita Singha has delved deep into the inner recess of Sakhisona's psyche and explored her/his agonized soul. Throughout the novel Sakhisona is known as his/her first name and without any title or surname. Kabita Singha has explored the representation of the subaltern in various forms. The process of marginalization works through different agencies. Physical forces, intimidation and social institutions as marriage work together to perpetuate this marginality and in each and every case this perpetuation is effected to ensure male domination and male interest of all kinds. But in Kabita Singha's novel, Sarala, Sakhisona and Shibnath all attempted to break away this stereotype which the society expected them to conform to perpetually. They looked for new meaning of life in their own way. This search becomes significant in the novel.

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