

**A Study of the Subaltern Culture of Jhumur and Nachni in Subrata  
Mukhopadhyay's *Rasik***

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**Abstract**

A quest of self is an important aspect in the novel *Rasik* (1991) by Subrata Mukhopadhyay. In the course of portraying the folk tradition of Jhumur and the life-sketch of Jhumur artists of Manbhum, the writer has attempted to explore the spirit of the fast disappearing tradition of Jhumur and Nachni. The stony earth of Manbhum and dire poverty of the people have been depicted in the novel in details. Jhumur is inspirational rains in the life of those people, deprived of basic amenities of life. In the novel *Rasik* Subrata Mukhopadhyay has minutely chronicled the disappearing class of Nachnis and their rasiks in Purulia. The saga in *Rasik* is replete with many accounts of how Nachnis cannot claim marriage, are debarred from owning families or children. Though the novel is titled as 'Rasik', the Nachnis have occupied an equal narrative space in the novel.

**Keywords-** *Nachni, Poverty, Folk, Culture, Tradition*

## Introduction

Nachni is an inseparable counterpart of Jhumur. It is a folk dance form in eastern India performed by women dancers, coming from the lowest social rung. They are accompanied by their women patron men, rasiks, who carry musical instruments as dholki and nagara. The dance originated in Odisha but was later widely performed in Jharkhand and Purulia region of West Bengal. Nachnis were considered as kept women in the beginning and paired with their rasiks in informal nuptial rituals. These nachnis mostly belong to the subaltern communities. From a conversation with Kiriti Mahato, Tripti Biswas comes to know the representation of the marginalized communities in the tradition of Jhumur. Kiriti Mahato reveals to her:

Ninety percent of Nachnis belong to the Ghasi, Kamar, Chasha, local Majhi and other scheduled caste communities. Nachnis and rasiks are mostly Kurmi, Bhumijo Singsardar, Mahato, Kheotder and Digar. (Biswas: 2003: 181)

The young Bijolibala is sold by Rasonabala, her mother, an old and poverty- stricken Nachni to a dacoit. Rescued by her already married paramour Pandav Kumar, Bijoli finds shelter in his home, alongside the older rasik Dhruva Kumar, his ageing Nachni Kusmibai and Pandav Kumar's wife Lata. Out of infatuation for Bijoli, Pandav resolves to take her as her own Nachni. He was desperate to win the soul of Bijoli. His sexual infatuation for her was so un uncontrollable that he attempted to assault her sexually at a stormy night finding her unguarded at her room. Kusmibai found it out. It was shocking to her not because of her considering Bijoli as her daughter but also her realization that his rasik Pandav Kumar has no love left for her. This realization of getting finished and helpless maddened Kusmibai. She left Pandav Kumar's home immediately braving rains and thunder. The next morning her body was found floating in the barrage water. The novel ends in a heart-wringing scenario when Kusmibai's dead body is tied to a rope and dragged to the village outskirts to be deserted there for feasting dogs and jackals for Nachnis are not entitled to either cremation or burial rites under the prevailing canons. The writer describes the final journey of Kusmibai:

Bijolibala sees Kusmi floating in the current of river flow. Her one leg is tied with a piece of rope the one end of which is in Prahlad's hand. (Mukhopadhyay: 1991: 649)

Besides references to and anecdotes of man and woman relationship the novel has two important subplots depicting agonies of unrequited love. Both contribute to the development of the main plot. Prabhanjan, the old blind rasik and his ageing Nachni Manjurani accepted Taranisen as their disciple. Taranisen was looking for his suitable woman for making his Nachni. Without Nachni the sadhana of Jhumur is believed to be futile. First he tried to win the soul of Sabitri, the woman whom Taranisen's sister Kamala hated strongly as she believed her husband Dibakar was infatuated with. But later Taranisen discovered that he was a eunuch. Taranisen was taken aback to find how a

eunuch won the soul of a woman. Taranisen first realized beauty and charm of romance from Manjurani who taught him how communion of two human bodies opened the doors to mystic realization of music. Taranisen could not find any match of Nachni for him. His quest of love was tinged in the colours of a sense of being unfulfilled and tears. And this sense of loss and loneliness has got reflected in his songs. His love for Dulali, too found a competitor in Badan. Ultimately Dulali left them both. Her departure was perhaps meant for something else which was not to be mired in the soil of hunger and lust. Her quest was perhaps meant for something of greater quality. In the novel Prabhanjan observes:

Dulali has no shelter, no family of her own, no attachment, and no desire for anything. Dulali comes to give open-handed. They only give, take nothing. They take nothing, nothing. (Mukhopadhyay: 1991: 642)

In different Jhumur-songs Radha is depicted as a common woman, dipped in the sorrows and miseries of life. The sankritized Radha is absent there. Radha is constructed in the cast of the tearful life of a nachni. Pabitra Bhattacharya says:

Radha in a folk tradition is always a witness of sorrows and miseries as well as separations and agonies of common men and women. (Bhattacharya: 2008:19)  
(Translation mine)

When a nachni represents Radha on the stage, she represents her own 'self'. The boundary between life and art disappears. All through the novel we see the real life and the life in the Jhumur art walk hand in hand.

The writer Subrata Mukhopadhyay has documented in details the cultural life of the Jhumur artists and Nachnis, representatives of those people pushed to the margin economically and culturally. Jhumur which is mainly based on the love story of Radha and Krishna upholds the earthly version of love between Radha and Krishna. The polished form of Kirtan Songs has philosophized and spiritualized the story. The popular form is marginalized and pushed to the brink by the power centre of culture controlled by power by the educated Bangali bhadralok. Ujjwal Majumder comments:

*Rasik* is not merely the music culture of the Jhumur artists, but a *fleur du mal*, created by a connoisseur of life. The notes of Jhumur and those of unachievable dream-Jhumur meet together to give rise to a charming *sur-saptak*, a combination of seven notes. (Majumder: 2009:202) (Translation mine)

The final impression of *Rasik* is not charming, rather it is disturbing. Whatever the intention of the writer is, the text offers possibilities of more than one reading. The text brings out the exploiting and cruel nature of the male hegemony in the subaltern Jhumur-communities.

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