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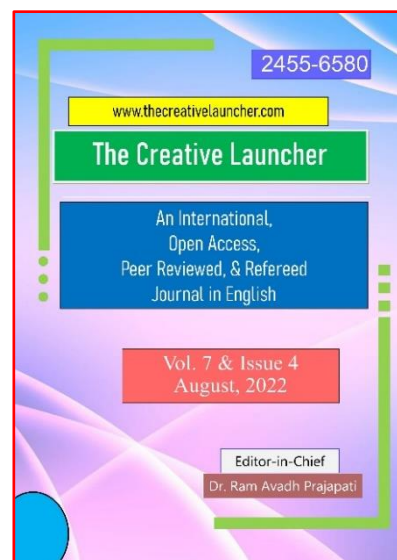
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Research Article



Education, Empowerment and Eros: Fakir Mohan Senapati's "Rebati"

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Abstract

Fakir Mohan Senapati's "Rebati", considered to be the first short story written in Odia, has now been hailed as a classic for the manner it dramatizes burning social issues that the Odia society confronted at the end of the nineteenth century, majorly women's education, in a seemingly simple yet powerful narrative. Senapati, in the story, has immortalized the character of Rebati, the ten-year-old girl from nineteenth century rural Odisha, so as to express his views regarding various facets of women's education and its relation to empowerment in a style that has historically appealed readers of all age groups. The paper attempts to highlight Fakir Mohan's

ideological ambivalence towards women's education as well as heterosexual love as represented in the story.

Keywords: Allegory, Woman's education, Patriarchy, Ideological Ambivalence, Social Stereotypes

Fakir Mohan Senapati (1843-1918) was a versatile genius of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century Odisha and the most representative writer of the colonial period in Odia. He is credited with writing the first major Odia novel, *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, translated into English as *Six Acres and a Third*, the first short story in Odia, "Rebati" (1898) and the first Odia autobiography, *Atmajeevana Charita*. Besides, he authored a number of textbooks including a history of India, translated the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and a few Upanishads to Odia. Apart from *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, he also penned three more novels, *Lachhama* (1901), *Mamu* (1913) and *Prayaschita* (1915). His short stories are very popular among the Odia readers and are compiled in two volumes called *Galpasalpa*. He is popularly referred to as "Byasa Kabi" in Odisha because of his translation of the *Mahabharata* into Odia.

Fakir Mohan Senapati has been hailed as the "grand patriarch of the linguistic and cultural movement for Odia identity" (Mund 411). He ceaselessly and uncompromisingly struggled to assert a distinct Odia identity in the face of a growing Bengali and Western cultural dominance and is widely respected for his significant role in giving an identity to Odia language, Odia literature and even Odia nationalism. In his fictional works he is mostly concerned with issues of oppression of peasantry, poverty, education, untouchability, widow remarriage, superstitions, so on and so forth. Fakir Mohan was "a social realist par excellence... [and his] realism flowed from his sympathy and sensitivity to changes of Oriya society, brought about in the wake of colonialism-imperialism" (Behera 3505).

"Rebati", published in the magazine, *Utkala Sahitya* (No. 10, Oct, 1898) is now hailed as a classic and narrates the complex story of an adolescent girl who pursues education, an act that was considered blasphemous during the late 19th century. As Sachidananda Mohanty asserts, the story reflects Fakir Mohan's "larger historical and socio-realistic interest in dramatising the unique conjunction of feudalism, colonialism and ethnicity in Orissa" (Mohanty 42). The story has been read as an "allegory for woman's education and identity" and considered as a "feminist literary milestone" (Mohanty 42).

Fakir Mohan was zealously involved in the field of education throughout his life and was associated with the first girls' school of Odisha. He was one of the few individuals who urged parents to send their daughters to school in large numbers because though women received some sort of basic education at home, formal education for them was more or less absent. For instance, Fakir Mohan's heroines in *Mamu* and *Prayaschita* receive education at home. But in "Rebati" he departs from this practice and makes an adolescent girl desire formal

education in the public domain and the story dramatizes the various tensions brought about by this desire not only of the girl but also her father and her tutor.

The story of “Rebati” revolves around the life of a ten-year-old girl, Rebati, the daughter of Shyambandhu Mohanty who worked as an accountant of the local landlord and collected revenue on his behalf. He nurtures a desire to educate his daughter and finds a way when a young man of twenty, Basudeb, arrives as a teacher to the village school. But the whole idea of educating Rebati is vehemently opposed by her grandmother who believed that such an exercise was futile and instead Rebati ought to learn “how to cook, bake, churn butter and decorate wall with rich paste” (St. Pierre 5). Shyambandhu, despite his mother’s opposition, employs Basudeb as Rebati’s tutor and is able to convince his mother referring to Basudeb’s suitability as a prospective bridegroom in terms of caste, good looks and marital status. Within two years Rebati manages to master the Odia alphabets, reading as well as writing. But the story takes an ill-fated turn with the onset of the cholera epidemic, very common in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century. Shyambandhu and his wife die due to cholera as a result of which there is a complete financial breakdown in the family. The old grandmother ascribes the misfortune to Rebati’s education and curses her for bringing about the calamity. The story takes yet another unfortunate turn when Basudeb too succumbs to cholera. The old woman is now more than convinced that these successive catastrophes are the results of the curse incurred due to Rebati’s education. She almost goes insane and starts abusing her granddaughter and the language that she employs for abusing her has entered the collective psyche of Odia readers – “Lo Rebati! Lo Rebi!, Lo nian!, Lo chuli”, translated as “Rebati! Rebi! You fire that turn all to ashes!” (19). Rebati slowly withdraws into silence, contracts typhoid and finally dies.

The story definitely centres on female education and the various beliefs and superstitions associated with it. The story is significant because of the manner in which it contests patriarchal discourse on education. The issue of female education, as already mentioned, was close to Fakir Mohan’s life. A cursory look at his biography reveals that there was a gap between his education and that of his child brides (Fakir Mohan had married twice, the second time after his first wife’s death) and this gap might have been instrumental in shaping his ideas on female education. Education, particularly female education, finds a significant place not only in the life but also the literary works of Fakir Mohan Senapati. What is obvious in the story is that Fakir Mohan extends his interrogation of feudalism, as is evident in his other works, to patriarchy by making Rebati, Shyamabandhu and Basudeb challenge patriarchal and feudal beliefs about female education. The way she innocently reacts to the proposal of getting education – “I’m going to study...I’m going to learn to read!” (St. Pierre 5) and snubs her grandmother when she disapproves of her education is a defiance of patriarchal ethos. The role of Basudeb in Rebati’s education is very significant. He is the one who informs Shyamabandhu about the girls’ school in Cuttack and also starts tutoring Rebati every evening. In other words, he epitomizes hope and “symbolizes possibilities of psychological and spiritual

deliverance” (Mohanty 47) The grandmother who represents the old feudal and patriarchal order has to be convinced by her son that Rebati’s education poses no threat to the existing social order because her education would make her learn and sing devotional songs and the *Bhagavata* like the way Jhankar Pattanaik’s daughters sing and read. Shyambandhu effects a compromise with the orthodox patriarchal and caste-ridden society when he proposes to get Rebati married off to Basudeb.

But the story is not just limited to the portrayal of Rebati’s rendezvous with education and the superstitions associated with it. Fakir Mohan has a definite ideological purpose in presenting the educational passage of Rebati. He tries to bring together in the story the issues of female identity, female empowerment and female education and considering the fact that it was impossible for him to empower Rebati in economic terms bearing in mind the constrictions of the times, he resorts to the agency of education to vest Rebati with an identity of her own. We see in the story how her education helps her in broadening her mental horizon:

The following afternoon Basu brought Rebati a copy of Sitanath Babu’s *First Lessons*. She was so overjoyed she leafed through the book from cover to cover. The pictures of elephants, houses, and cows thrilled her no end...Over the next two years Rebati studied a great deal. All the rhymes of Madhu Rao were on the tip of her tongue and she could reel them off without faltering. (St. Pierre6-7)

Shyambandhu’s decision to educate his daughter in a non-Western manner reflects the nineteenth century inclination on the part of the middle class to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. This education, the middle class believed, would empower women and confer them with an identity that would not only challenge patriarchal orthodoxy but also western standards of morality.

But the introduction of the cholera episode into the story exposes Fakir Mohan’s ambiguity about female education. Rebati’s suffering are definitely due to her gender and Fakir Mohan’s desire to empower Rebati and provide her with an identity through education fails because of her status as a woman. The story does not in any way expresses Fakir Mohan’s aversion to women’s education as some readers believe; rather the story problematizes the issue of women’s education in Colonial Odisha and relates it to larger questions of modernity. Fakir Mohan laments that in the existing social set up it was impossible to endow women with a distinct identity. Senapati introduces the cholera a narrative device to prevent the education of Rebati and simultaneously generate sympathy for her. It also suggests Fakir Mohan’s disinclination towards transgressing the limits of the society. One can locate an ambivalence in Fakir Mohan’s position regarding women’s education and empowerment. As Subhakanta Behera says, Fakir Mohan had to “surrender before the compulsions of society, thereby refusing Rebati her identity which he really wanted, in his role as a socially responsible writer. It was his realism, his understanding of the social ethos that prevented him from going against society” (Behera 3507).

Yet critics like P. Dalai downplay education as a major concern of the much-anthologized story. Dalai's "The Curse of 'Love': Re-Reading Fakir Mohan Senapati's "Rebati" tries to read the theme of 'Love' in the story and asserts that it is Rebati's love for Basudeb that is central to the unfolding of the plot. Thus, "Rebati" can also be read as "19th century love story that depicts two young heart's non-verbal exchange of love in a very platonic sense." (Dalai 61) Despite Sarojini Sahoo's reservation against interpreting the story as a tale of love Dalai tries to interpret this platonic love between Basudeb and Rebati in the context of 19th century cultural historicity of Odisha. Fakir Mohan very subtly subverts the tutor/taught binary by introducing the 'love' element into the "pious" relationship without a pinch of vulgarity. But just as he is ambiguous about the status of female education so also, he exposes his ambiguity about this relationship. The 'love' between Rebati and Basudeb is not allowed to reach fruition as Fakir Mohan could not have transgressed the moral limits by allowing the love between the tutor and the taught. In both cases of portraying female education and love Fakir Mohan's realism scores over his ideological inclination.

Shruti Das sees the figure of Rebati as a "gendered subaltern". Quoting Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, Das says that a gendered subaltern "disappears because we never hear her speak about herself. She is simply the medium through which competing discourses represent their claims" (Das 35). For Das Rebati is caught like the "third world woman" between the "Western humanistic rationalism and a non-Western Odia culture with its inherent orthodoxy". (Das 36). Her tragic end is a resolution brought about by the author that reveals his ambiguous stand about female education and heterosexual love.

"Rebati" is Fakir Mohan's masterpiece because it's seemingly simple narrative conceals many of Fakir Mohan's own attitudes towards burning social issues of the times. It appeals to readers of all age groups because of its multiple layers of significance. The text of "Rebati" invites multiple interpretations and has acquired new meanings in its literary journey of more than a hundred years. As the web page of MyCity Links says, the story "reads like a cautionary tale against allowing the female agency to be educated, lest it should spell doom and disaster. On another level, it's a progressive story that exposes social stereotypes against women." (Firdaus) The recent pandemic has also provided an interesting framework for understanding this 'classic' in a new light. The story has been so popular across Indian languages that Dhali books recently brought out a voluminous anthology called *Rebati: Speaking in Tongues* containing translation of the path breaking short story in 36 languages including French, German, Hebrew, Polish, Gujarati, Malayalam and a host of other languages. Owing to its popularity this iconic story was adapted for a twelve-episode serial in the Tarang TV in 2017.

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