

Postmodern Bangla Short Stories: the arrival of the departure (Part V)

To Be and of Letting Be: Women Writers

MALAY ROY CHOUDHURY

The articulation of the margins has taken different forms in the fictions of women writers as their struggle is an ongoing process to find a form of self-definition. Theirs is not the obedient reproduction of patriarchal paranoid projections; rather it is simultaneous arguments to focus on the need for careful deconstruction of the very structures of dominant and marginal. Bangla fictions was initiated by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyaya with the placing of a female at the center of the discourse of *Durgeshnandini* (1865), which he continued in subsequent novels *Kapalakundala*, *Mrinalini*, and *Devi Choudhurani*. The first Bangla short story *Madhumati* (1873), written by Bankim's brother Purnachandra Chattopadhyaya, also had a female at the center of the discourse. However, with the stranglehold of colonial modernity, the center of Bangla fiction became an irreplaceable Hindu male upper class domain.

Colonial modernity represented an effort to synthesize its progressive and emancipatory ideals into universalizing integrating narrative of the Hindu male individual's place in history and society, and took it for granted that there existed a Hindu male legitimate center, an ostensibly superior and unchallengeable position from which controls are established and hierarchies determined. The domination of the center expressed itself in fictions as a linguistic subordination of every grammatical person to the upper-caste Hindu male called 'hero.' The premodern vision had a duality of two-in-one while placing the female prior to male, such as in Sita-Ram, Radha-Krishna, Laila-Majnu, Savitri-Satyavan, etc. Fiction by women writers had emerged through the family magazine *Bharati* (1879) edited by Rabindranath Tagore's elder brother Dijendranath (1840-1926) and subsequently by his sister Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932).

Swarnakumari Devi's fictions preceded the all-pervading influence of Rabindranath Tagore and could therefore retain premodern literary values for which modernist academician Srikumar Bandhopadhyaya

claimed that they were full of defects. She was much closer to the values of pre-colonial pregeneric rhymed fictions and hagiographs which used to be organized in an open-endedness inherent in the plurality of the ethnic space and religion, and were obviously considered as messy by the British colonialists. Consequently, post-Tagore fictions were packed in closed structures in tight and neat patterns to give them self-contained, self-sufficient and almost ineffable character. The premodern, pre-colonial texts had the capacity to sustain worlds. The motifs and devices employed in her fictions could not be catalogued by modernist critics to securely identify a genre, as their variations went beyond modernist stylistic regularity.

The first generation of women short story writers, Saratkumari Chaudhurani (1861-1920), Sharaladevi (1872-1945), Madhurilata (1886-1918), Indira Devi (1879-1922), Anurupa Devi (1882-1958) and Nirupama Devi (1883-1951), were groomed in the familial mirror image of European Enlightenment. Right from the very beginning, there had been a difference between language memories of women and men writers. Modernist male authors' stories, including *Shastravirodhi* fiction, have been structured as quest narratives detailing the protagonist's or author's solitary progress through a maze of obstacles and difficulties, and are eventual triumphant emergence as a linguistically and culturally competent subject. This linear journey became more focused right through Pramatha Choudhury's (1868-1946) intellectual individuality, Sailajananda Mukhopadhyaya's (1901-1976) instinctive individuality, Samaresh Basu's (1924-1988) internal individuality, to the author of *Bonshi Baigar Abhishek* Kanai Kundu's (1935) avant garde individuality. On the contrary, women writers' stories have had a less linear plot, and their protagonists have been less alone, as was evidenced in the fictions of women writers of subsequent generation such as Shanta Devi (1893-1984), Sita Devi (1895-1974), Shailabala

Ghoshjaya (1894-1973) and Prabhavati Devi Saraswati (1905-1972). Generally, the most significant events or turning points of their texts involved the construction of meaningful relationships with others. Intersubjectivity, rather than just subjectivity, has been the cultural preoccupation of women writers. Nevertheless, women writers generally were socialized to metropolitan femininity prior to Mahashweta Devi. Incidentally, I do not find any women writer in the anthology *Golpo Shaat Shottor* (1987), i.e., Stories from the Sixties and Seventies, edited by Uttam Das. There was no woman poet of fiction writer in the *Hungryalist*, *Shastravirodhi* and *Neem Sahitya* movements.

...Postmodern women fiction writers employ trialectic of *space, time and social being*. Anuradha Gupta articulates an ecological ethics of alterity while in Jyotsna Karmakar's stories, *space* is fundamental to the form of the commune and exercise of its power. Doli Dutta's stories enter into and echo postmodernist discourse as they, in stages, deconstruct notions of reason, knowledge and subjectivity. Alpana Ghosh interpolates assemblages through ruptured texts which facilitates proliferation of meanings, resulting into spread of narrative energy in various trajectories, mainly postcolonial transvaluation of political, economic and social *spaces* plagued by disillusion. In case of certain women writers such as Shorni Pandey, Tilottoma Majumdar, Yashodhara Raychaudhuri, Rama Karmakar, Arati Kahali Goswami, Jaya Mitra, Jaya Goala, Meenakshi Sen, Madhuri Lodh, Anita Rana, Sudeshna Chakraborty and Neeta Biswas, their discursive practices open up venues of liberation aspirations, simultaneously stimulating their performative agenda for activating an altogether different vision. Stories written by them expose and reveal the shortcomings and dominance of mainstream literary values, undermines patriarchal cultural beliefs, and aspires to dismantle the very patriarchal Occidental orthodoxy of the genre. On the flip side, Ahana Biswas and Anita Agnihotri Ahana is a Viswa Bharati-educated academic and

Anita is a bureaucrat explore tensions and contradictions that are generated when micro-level discourses exploit the dominant structures to expose the secret and unspoken happenings within mainstream forms. As a form it creates opportunities to tell the untold, beyond traditional Bangla *womanliness*, and at the same time avoid Western feminist discourses. As a challenge to the status quo, both social and generic, articulation of the untold and the alternative, affects the dominant orthodoxy, and spawns fresh possibilities of producing new meanings.

...Postmodern short stories by women writers get interwoven in their semantic, semiotic and syntactic aspirations in a fashion that disrupt the decorous hierarchy of colonial literary genres implanted in Bangla literature by modernist upper caste male authors, and insisted upon by modernist critics and academicians, and even by the patriarchs of such para-academic institutions as publishing or broadcasting or journalism. Since the commercial, consumer-friendly magazine literature, a colonial derivative, continue to be dominated by lucre-driven male editors, women writers have to continuously face the trap of modernist male derivativeness, a violence that a centrist, universalizing, hegemonist, patriarchal episteme does to its victims. There would be tremendous pressure on women writers to write like certain popular male fiction writers. Nevertheless, with substantial increase of women writers in the younger generation, one may assume that such pressures would be limited only to a few women who try to keep the patriarchs in good humour. Some of the *branded feminist* authors are in fact sponsored by literary patriarchs.

Compared to postmodern fiction by young women writers, such fictions by young men adopt strategies of portraying present Bangla nightmare that are curt and ruthless because of the anarchism they are forced to carry in a politically directionless scenario. Women writers explore social evils as manifestations of socio-cultural contradictions, and such explorations are more explicit in

the fictions of Barak Valley, Tripura and West Bengal's nonmetropolitan authors. However, almost all authors of the newer generation adopt complex interpretative strategies by rejecting the parameters of modernist definitions of short story, excepting for the magazine writers, of course, who resort to the language of the consumer. Their postmodern texts are not all engaged in documentation, or in what avant-garde writers used to call 'creative writing', or what the diasporic leftists called chronicles of social reality.

Disentitlement and Metastasis: Muslim Writers

Postmodern texts of Bangla Muslim authors of West Bengal, Tripura and Barak Valley of Assam demand a very close reading and re-reading., as the articulations record opaque ecstasies and secret anguishes transformed into narrative power, while forces and fluxes of writer's pre-colonial Islamic palimpsest memory are projected into the experiences of an apparently secular present. The texts may conceal tortured convergence of several tangential, parallel and divergent elements. The authors share the vulnerability of the *Other*. Here they are poles apart from Bangladeshi authors. The Hindu authors in Bangladesh are the *Other*.

...Bangla Muslim fiction writers were conspicuous by their absence for almost two decades after Independence, as the metropolitan creamy layer of the community departed for East Pakistan. The potential authors and the readers simply vanished. Emergence of an educated middle-class took some time. Even the *Notun Reeti* fiction manifesto that came up in 1958 to accommodate the first post-Partition generation of fiction writers failed to have space for a Muslim author. There was no Muslim participant in the *Hungryalist*, *Shastravirodhi* and *Neem Sahitya* movements. Syed Mustafa Siraj emerged subsequently, possibly because he was a Syed, who had to securely place himself within centralist metropolitan canon, to be accepted. In view of the universalized discourse, Siraj

may not be stationed at the periphery as the *Other*, in the center-margin cartography.

Bangla Muslim fiction writers emerged during and after the Naxal upheavals who began to question universal principles of truth, as the Bangla polity was shaken from bottom to top, creating a level playing field for Muslim authors, to enable them to articulate their newly acquired confidence. However, no Muslim author has been included in *Naxal Andoloner Golpo* (1999) anthologized by Bijit Ghosh. Authors who subsequently appeared such as Badaruzzaman Choudhury, Joyal Abedin in Barak Valley, and Abdul Jabbar, Afsar Ahmen, Ansaruddin, Sohrab Hossain, Niharul Islam, Ebadul Haque, Helen Noor-e-Azad, Kamal Hossain, Murshid A. M. and others in West Bengal, developed and articulated a sense of cultural and subcultural imagination, opened up micro-cultural native forms to celebrate texts of indigenous heterogeneity and Muslim oral traditions. Another reason for their emergence and reason for subsequent intra-community rural discord was power restructuring due to land reforms. The largest segment of the community is engaged in agriculture. Author Murshid A. M. is actually Murshed Ali Mondol. During the post-Naxal period, the community started exuviating vocational surnames such as Mondol, Gharami, Laskar, Majhi, Kathami, Sardar, Mahajan, etc., to get rid of subaltern semiotic taint. Since Independence, these authors have a tendency to abbreviate their names, which may be explained in socio-cultural terms as postmodern paroxysms of self-mutilation, as have been done by A. Mannaf, S.M. Nijamuddin, M. Nasiruddin Khan, M. Abdullah Mollah, and others.

...The (Muslim) author faces a double-edged challenge. The readership comprise a Hindu majority which has very little knowledge of the multiple layers of micro-cultures of urban and rural Bangla Muslims. The critics and academics are Hindu, mostly upper caste, who generally do not have much knowledge either. If a Muslim hero is constructed at the center of the discourse, it may create a



cartographic violence unless the margin is also fictionalized as Muslim. *Eternal truth* evaporates into thin air if a Hindu boy falls in love with a Muslim girl, even in fictions. If the author aspires to enter the centrist metropolitan consumer-friendly literature, he is doomed to create make-believe culture and characters for a majority-dominated book market. In the same manner that upper-caste Hindu writers mimicked, copied, borrowed, repeated, imitated and aped English authors and their canons during colonial rule, the Muslim author is forced to follow popular Hindu writers of the day. If he does not, he is doomed to be permanently marginalized, neglected and debarred from literary history. From the days of Mir Mosharrif Hossain (1847-1912) and his periodical *Ajijan Nehar* through other magazines like *Moslem Bharat*,

Mohammadi to Ataur Rahman's (1919-1997) *Chaturanga*, the entire oeuvre of Muslim fiction writers is completely absent in linear mapping of Bangla short stories by Sisir Kumar Das, Narendranath Chakrabarty, Upendranath Gangopadhyaya, Bhudeb Choudhury and Narayan Gangopadhyaya. The problem with these linearity-driven literary historians have been that they have confined themselves to dissection of the plot. In the short stories written by Muslim authors, the plots would have proved culturally uncharted and inaccessible. And for Muslim authors the

complex cultural framing of the stories is vital to their meaning.

With the increase in the number of Muslim writers as well as the magazines to sustain them, the covert and overt local narratives of the periphery have started challenging and undermining the exclusive and universalizing pressures of the dominant discourses and discursive practices. Magazines such as *Abar Eshchehi Phiray* edited by Ebadul Haque is published from rural rice-bowl of Bhagwangola; *Digbaloy* is edited by Kamaluddin Ahmed from Karimganj in Assam. It is obvious that is such a vast panorama the text of young Muslim authors becomes the site of struggles between conflicting discourses, a site where personal and communal trauma intersect, creating scope for alternative readings. The panorama is also replete with non-metropolitan Bangla discursive unconscious, a repressed sense which had been internalized from the hegemonic discourses. But the cultural spaces do not provide homogeneity to authors stationed in West Bengal, Tripura and Barak Valley. Postmodern canonless-ness for them functions as the external unifier.

Malay Roy Choudhury is a poet/novelist who was the founder of the 'Hungry Literary Movement' in the 1960s. He lives in Kolkata.

Monsoon Poem with Prose Postscript

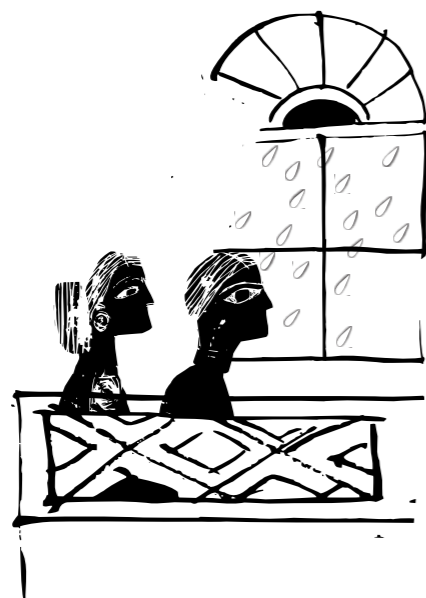
KAISER HAQ

Even large print blurs
in draining light.
One could imagine Purgatory--
a vast shanty town--
set ablaze, smoke
becoming ink-black clouds,
setting the mood
for monsoon's advent.

Find yourself a bamboo hut--
mud floor, tin roof--
and wait as moist air wraps
you like a winding sheet.

It comes:
a drop
on the tin roof--
C sharp!

And more,
beating a tattoo,
pounding dust
to release roar;
it seems the ground beneath
might dissolve
like sugar cubes in tea.



Buddha says: Everything is transient; clutch at nothing--and his disciples holed up in monasteries to meditate on his teaching till the rains let up. I would like to meditate too but I have to go to a party--where the inane chatter on the monsoon's beauty--unique to our land--and Rabindranath Tagore's divine lyrics on the theme is enough to drive me nuts. My monsoon thoughts are now of noxious gutters swelling into a deluge, carrying away the detritus of all our days.

Truth on the Prowl

Browsing through Vedantic verdure
He reads: *The Truth is one
And indivisible*
It lulls him to sleep.

He dreams:
Truth is single
And lonely:
On the prowl.

But everyone keeps away.
Truth goes to Singles Bars
But no one's interested--
Neither men nor women,
Straight, gay, lesbian, bi.

Finally Truth meets Falsity,
Fixes a date--
and is stood up.

Truth looks into a mirror,
Touches itself--
nothing happens.

Truth sits alone
Drinking, lugubriously
Watches men and women
Busy at their pleasures.

About Green

KHONDAKAR ASHRAF HOSSAIN
(translated by the poet)

My country is famous for being green
and nothing cures myopia
better than green does.
women look killing in their green saris.
As the colour of envy is green,
I get envious seeing our green pastures
fill up with stables up to the horizon.

1988, the year on the almanac,
is for those who hate green.
And the hired menials who are digging
the horizons for putting up a stable--
they too wear green, creating a pretty
illusion for the eyes.
(As a *laudugi* snake camouflages
among the reeds!)

Our pretty women bent like a river
and laughed at the slightest joke:
a blow on their thighs has silenced them.
Our women's smiles was as pure as their
youth;
their larynxes have been cast in concrete.

'Green, green, I love you green,'
chanted a Spanish poet, and went on
to plant his flag in the bosom of love;
we hardly know the colour of the foxes
who now urinate on his grave.

My country is famous for being green,
and nothing cures myopia
better than green does--

Of course blindness needs a hasher cure.

