

## Cultural Construct: Women in Bangla Literature

1. This article is an edited version of 'No Noras in Popular Bangla Literature', written for the Xth International Ibsen Conference, June 0108, 2003, New York, USA, at which the author was unable to appear since he was not granted a travel visa by the US embassy in Dhaka.  
2. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Bangla works are done by the author.

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LITERATURE and culture play a crucial role in the establishment, maintenance and contestation of political power by forging a "manufactured consent" to keep up the so-called equilibrium in society. Gramsci (1891-1937) calls this exploitive system "hegemony" which views, sees, judges and evaluates the people and things from a perspective that serves only the interest of a specific group or class. Thus, literature and culture create some values or constructs which are accepted at their face value without question or reasoning. Seen in this light, literature can be a very powerful means to present a set of a kind of mythical values to regulate the lives of people in a community. The intended goal is achieved when these values gradually but surely make people believe that they must accept them for their own good and that anything contrary to these values shall have to be considered sacrilegious. Therefore, the identity of a woman in our society, dictated from her infancy, is that she is weak, insignificant, and such a delicate creature, which needs to be protected by a strong and powerful man. By the same token, her identity is determined by her relationship with a male; as if she was, is and will always be, somebody's daughter, wife or mother. Even a cursory glance at the frequently read pieces by classical Bangla writers reveal that portraits of women are rather a hegemonic representation. They are made believable, because their creators listen to the dictates of what is dubbed as 'cultural construct.'

A consideration of modern classical Bangla literature must begin with Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). How does he treat women in his works? As shown by Md Harun-ur-Rashid in a Bangla essay (1999), "Tagore's women have two gods the creator-god and the man", because man has created woman out of his own imagination. In the

poem titled *Manoshi* (the maid of imagination), one of the representative poems by the poet, ends with the idea that it is man who gives existence to woman, implying that man stands for activity and woman for passivity. Man is the creator, architect, sculptor, poet and artist, and woman the statue created by man. Rashid concludes that in "Tagore's conception, women end up being an immature, powerless, incomplete species solely dependent on man."

In the short stories, barring a few exceptions, Tagore offers the woman portraits to man's craving and satisfaction, which, in other words, is the constructed self of woman, the 'pure gold baby'. For instance, *Swamapti* ('The End') has at its centre Mrinmoyee, who is not at all handicapped by her sexual identity, which, had she been aware of, would put her in the confines of sharply detailed domesticity. However, she is married off to Apurba despite her refusal, "I will not marry..." Yet, she had to marry. Then started the process of her schooling. Overnight, the whole world of Mrinmoyee got confined inside the house of Apurba's mother."

As the story unfolds, Mrinmoyee finds it hard to get on with her mother-in-law; the husband too finds it difficult going with his girl-wife. Apurba goes to Calcutta, sending her back to her mother. It is time Mrinmoyee was metamorphosed into a "pretty little pet." Mrinmoyee however no longer likes her mother's home: "One who was living there earlier is all of a sudden no more there. Now all the heart's endeavour is humming around that other home, that other room, that other bed." She goes back to her in-laws' home. She now truly emerges as the woman of man's desire calm, quiet, somber, sober, and submissive. In keeping with the society's ideal womanhood "She began to talk to herself, "For the fact that I could not understand myself, why you didn't understand me? Why didn't you punish me? Why didn't you drive

me according to your will? Why didn't you take me with you to Calcutta by force, when I, the beast, had refused to go? Why did you listen to me, accept my request, endure my defiance?" (emphasis added)

In order to be an ideal wife, Mrinmoyee needs to be transformed yet further. Apurba comes back home after a long time, and understandably, is not aware of Mrinmoyee's change. The last paragraph of the story runs as follows "As [Apurba] was about to get to his bed, a pair of delicate hands bound him with a sudden murmur of bangles, and a lip of petal seized, like a dacoit, upon him, not letting him express his sense of bewilderment at her ceaseless kisses mixed with emotion and tears. First, Apurba stared, then he realized, a long-awaited..."

incomplete endeavour found completion today through spring of tears."

Tagore's *Haimanti* is taught at the college level across the country. The husband in the story loves Haimanti the wife soft and never complaining who will never tell her husband of the wrongs she is exposed to in their family. The mother-in-law, herself a woman, is the prominent cause of Haimanti's suffering, and quite expectantly the tender readers, irrespective of gender, will harbour a hatred towards the mother. However, one should hardly blame the woman, a poor creature, who, in all probability, herself was maltreated when she entered the family as a bride. The patriarchal values led her to accept all that she does as normal, legitimate and, therefore, inevitable. Over the years, a total demolition of womanhood has taken place and consequently she is no more a woman; rather, she is her husband's wife, son's mother and daughter-in-law's mother-in-law, who is not at all ashamed of injuring the other woman for dowry. And it has to be the manufactured self of the mother who will insist that her son remarry. The son feels that he will not be able to turn aside the request of the mother, implying that he will consent in time.

So what could be the possible impact of the story on the young? They are supposed to adore Haimanti for her softness, gracefulness and patience, and abhor the mother-in-law

because of her monstrous appearance. Once again it is inevitable that a woman is to remain either an angel or a beast identically constructed by man is trapped in a vicious cycle of which she can never come out.

In many of his popular

poems and songs, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) dwells upon the female issues with sympathy and favour. Yet, Nazrul too cannot rise beyond the masculine way of perceiving women, as shall be revealed in one of his most significant poems *Nari* ('Woman').

The poet is convinced that women have been subjected to negligence and oppression from time immemorial. He quite emphatically says that he sees no difference between man and woman. And an oft-repeated quote from this poem has it that ("*Bishey jachiu mahon sristi chirou kallayankar, Ordhek taar korieachey naree, ordhek taar naar.*") "Whatever great or benevolent achievements there are in this world, half of that was



tionally attributed to men. According to the poem, "Man has brought the burning, scorching / heat of the sunny day, / woman has brought peaceful night, / soothing breeze and cloud / ... Man comes with desert-thirst / woman provides the drink of honey, / Man ploughs the fertile land, / woman sows crops in it turning it green. / Man ploughs, woman waters / that earth and water mixed together / bring about a harvest of golden paddy!" (trans. Sajed Kamal) It is quite apparent that though Nazrul is indeed sincere in his sympathy for women, he, notwithstanding, perceives them absolutely in male terms, which implies that as a poet he is confined to the cultural construct of

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womanhood. In the poem Nazrul seems to be skeptical of history, which is *his* story and therefore does not record numerous sacrifices of women. Nevertheless, the rather sympathetic understanding of woman falls back on the same circle of reasoning that women are 'mother, sister and wife', not individuals in their own right.

*Barangana* ('The Prostitute'), another poem by Nazrul, addresses the prostitute as mother and says that this rather unfortunate creature was perhaps breast-fed in her infancy by a virtuous and ideal mother who, however, to society at large is a source of evil and hence unwanted. True, the poet pities her and, to an extent, criticizes the patriarchal institutions which are responsible for her present state of misery and suffering. Nevertheless, Nazrul feels for her because she, though not chaste, belongs to the race of 'mother-sister'.

In one of Nazrul's very popular and classic songs, *Mour Ghumhore Key Elay Monohour* ('Who is the beauty that traverses my dream'), the woman appears to have no individual identity as she is absolutely taken in by her *deuta*. Significantly, the woman is extremely satisfied with her role of playing a perfect foil to the man of her fancy. Since she does not have an independent existence of her own, she is pained at her separation from her 'dearest'. Waking up, she, in tears, expects the return of her *natavar*, the Shiva. Unquestionably, Nazrul, here, presents an ideal woman pertaining to the tradition upheld by patriarchy. Besides, *Bidrohi* ('The Rebel'), the poem which made Nazrul an overnight celebrity, is also not free from the straightjacket of gender. The speaker-poet makes a synthesis of different forces in the rebel who is at once a destroyer and a preserver as well as a living terror and a flutist. However, the poet conforms to his androcentricity when he speaks of the male gods Nataraj, Krishna capable of performing great actions. Beside the resonant presence of masculinity, the speaker's imagined self as a woman hardly manifests itself. Either she is a virgin lady, turned attractive for her unkempt locks, or she is a sweet-sixteen, with her heart full of lotus.

Sharat Chandra

Chattapadhaya (1876-1937) is yet another celebrated writer in Bangla literature who enjoyed, and still does, enormous popularity among Bangla-speaking communities all over the world. However, a look into his most popular novel *Devdas* reveals that in chronicling a love-story, he, though critical of society, encodes his patriarchal mindset within it.

The sixth chapter of the novel can be considered to be the climax, when the heroine Parvati, at a loss, goes to Devdas's room in one night, without being bothered about how society will view her the next morning if the visit is revealed. This is a move which society would have condemned, but no reader of the novel condemns Parvati for going to her lover at the late hours of night as it satisfies the male fantasy, the obsession and the desire of Bengali *babu*. What Parvati does in her anxious moments is exactly and erratically desirable to the tradition. She places her head on Devdas's feet and says, "Let me have a place here, Devda." It is the surrender of woman to a more powerful man which cannot but leave readers extremely satisfied.

Later on, after the tottering of make-believe world and emotional intensity, we notice Devdas hits Parvati. She is stained and starts crying. It is important to note that Devdas the man is exercising his authority over Parvati the woman. He is not criticized overmuch for his treatment of her in that fashion. In fact, it is Parvati who, emotion-choked, apologizes to Devdas as if it were all her fault, "Devdada, please forgive me", though it is she who was hit and now is literally bleeding from her wound. She is, of course, then the 'pure gold baby' who will argue with her lover but must not cross the limit.

Parvati is then married off to a widowed zaminder three times her age. She begins to accept the son and daughter of her husband from his previous marriage as her own children. The step-children are pleased with their new mother, to say the least. This is once again asked by society of a married woman: she must accept her husband's family, and Chattapadhaya is busy detailing a magnanimous woman! Meanwhile, Devdas takes to alcohol,

drinks heavily and, sticking to the convention, starts visiting Chandramukhi, a professional dancer and songstress. In the turn of events Chandramukhi, another magnanimous woman, develops love for Devdas and says adieu to her profession because Devdas does not like it. She takes care of him, nurses him in his illness, knowing fully well that he will never be hers. The image of woman acting as angel is extremely gratifying for the readers!

However, Devdas is seriously ill and he realizes that his days are numbered. Earlier he promised Parvati that he would meet her before his death. He goes to Parvati, but shortly after reaching there he dies. The news is conveyed and Parvati loses all control and rushes towards the gate. But the gate cannot be opened; Parvati cannot see the face of Devdas. And this is how Chattapadhaya finishes the tale: "*Do not know what has happened to Parvati after such a long period. Do not feel like knowing more of her. Only feel sorry for Devdas. Whoever amongst you reads this story, would be sorry like ourselves... There's no harm in dying, but make sure, at the time of death, there is a caring hand on the forehead so that the dying can die having his gaze fixed on an adoring face. Be it so that he dies after seeing a drop of tear of someone.*" (emphasis added)

The narrator is not worried over the fate of Parvati after her attempt to see Devdas in her frenzied state. He is only concerned about Devdas, and he is the tragic hero of the novel, whereas Parvati just does not have a place in the big world, because no one is really interested in her. In other words, a Parvati matters only in her relation to a Devdas, and she must not have any complaint.

Though classical Bangla literatures could hardly be accused of misogyny, they, however, could not do away with what has been called 'cultural construct' in their portrayal of women. Thus the women that traverse the pages of our popular literature are but constructed selves of what they ought to be and ought not to be.

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Ajit Baral cyber-chats with journalist-turned-fiction writer Aniruddha Bahal, who shrugs off the expletive-deleted lingo in his book *Bunker 13*...

Aniruddha Bahal is one of India's best-known journalists, the co-founder and former CEO of *tehelka.com*. Now that his racy novel *Bunker 13*, published in America by Farrar Straus Giroux and in England by Faber & Faber, is creating waves in the West he will be one of India's best-known writers of fiction as well. Aniruddha Bahal burst into the public eye with his expose of match-fixing in a gentleman's game, cricket. Later he shot to even bigger fame when he and his colleagues at *tehelka.com* exposed corruption in the Indian defence establishment the so-called *Tehelka* tapes which caused the brief resignation of defence minister George Fernandes. Ajit Baral talked via email with Bahal, back from a book promotion tour of the USA and UK, about his brand of journalism and *Bunker 13*, a book laced liberally with four-letter words, and about which *The Tribune's* reviewer, like most other reviewers, noted, "...the tone of the book, however, is novel. There is a cynical attitude to the whole narrative, a kind of bored, yet involved, standoffishness, which is fascinating. It is hard to say whether this is the writer's or the protagonist's attitude, but it does imply a rakishness, a 'devil-may-care-because-I-certainly-don't' feeling, that is certainly interesting."

**Ajit Baral:** How and when did you get into journalism?  
**Aniruddha Bahal:** My first job was at the desk of India Today in 1991. I gave a few copy tests and they chose me.

**Ajit:** You have a nose for scams, as your exposes of match-fixing and arms deals suggest. This nose for scams, is it something that you developed while working for some good magazines, or is it something inborn?

**Aniruddha:** I think every journalist, over time, develops a nose for a story. Soem are also gifted with being able to develop contacts much better than others.

**Ajit:** How has your experience with *tehelka* been? The fame that came with the expose of arms deal and the subsequent

hounding by the government? Aniruddha: *tehelka* has been a very rich experience. In the sense of the work that we did and handling the subsequent backlash of the system while they accused you of having all kinds of motives in having done Operation Westend. But they didn't succeed with that and that's what matters. The, however, did succeed in scaring away all the investors.

**Ajit:** You have founded another Web-based magazine, *cobrapost.com*. Is it because *tehelka* was banned?

**Aniruddha:** *tehelka* was never banned. I just want to continue the brand of journalism that we practised in *tehelka* in *cobrapost.com*, developing a small, independent platform incrementally. I want to continue practising a lot of public interest

journalism which the mainstream media is disinclined to do in India for a variety of reasons.

**Ajit:** Is *cobrapost.com* any different from *tehelka*?  
**Aniruddha:** It's just started. So let's see how it develops.

**Ajit:** How did the transition to a writer happen?

**Aniruddha:** I have always had ambitions to be a writer. In fact, I started writing *Bunker 13* way back in 1996 when *tehelka* hadn't even started. *tehelka* started only in 2000. I think if you are a journalist, and inclined to write fiction the job is easier for your imagination.

**Ajit:** Your novel got rave reviews in the West. The Observer has gone so far as to compare your book to Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead*. How does it feel?

**Aniruddha:** Very flattering. I think in the West it is being seen as a very un-Indian book. In the sense that Indian writers have a tendency to engage too much with the past, the British period, the Mughals, etc. And here was *Bunker 13* engaging with contemporary India.

**Ajit:** Not many Indian writers have ventured into the thriller genre. What made you write a thriller?

**Aniruddha:** I don't really consider *Bunker 13* a thriller. It's racy, that's why people are calling it a thriller. But in the US the bookstores had it all slotted differently, some under action, some literature, some in espionage. So it's a novel that works across genres.  
**Ajit:** Your first novel, *Night Out*, what is it about?

**Aniruddha:** It is a campus love story, written 12-13 years back.

**Ajit:** Wasn't it difficult to write the second novel, in the sense of your first novel having been rejected still ranking your mind?

**Aniruddha:** My agent Gillian Aitken rejected it. But it was published in India and the Indian market is very small. And then even more so!

**Ajit:** The trials and tribulations that you went through when with *tehelka*, has any of that seeped into the novel?

**Aniruddha:** Not from *tehelka*. But you could say that there are portions in the novel where I used my journalistic experience--portions where I could write about editorial meetings and then the war portion towards the end.

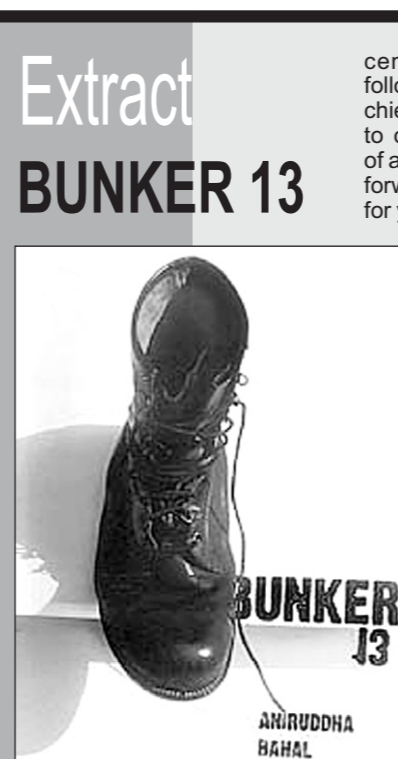
**Ajit:** You have been praised for your language. Is the language in the novel a natural extension of what you have been writing all along? Or have you tried to write differently to achieve different effects?

**Aniruddha:** It's a second-person tone, which I used because the reader feels as if he's in the cockpit and immersed in the scene. A kind of hypnotic effect if carried out well.

**Ajit:** Lastly, how would you like yourself to be remembered, a scam-busting journalist or a writer?

**Aniruddha:** I think my life will keep alternating between writing fiction and doing journalism. You can't really ask a father which one of his sons he likes more!

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You have soldiering boots stuck between your teeth so you don't maul your tongue. Major (Dr.) Sandy is lancing a blister on your toe at the turning point of your twelve-mile tab. The others have overtaken you. After fixing you up, even Sandy goes on ahead. You are left alone to pull up your boots, and you tense with pain as you dig your toes in and put some weight on them. You are increasingly feeling that you needn't have got into the shit you find yourself in right now, tabbing twelve miles with a forty-five-pound rucksack burning your back.

But out of the many ways that a *Homo sapiens* with an IQ of 130 can \*\*\*\* himself at the flagging end of the twentieth

century is by writing the following to his country's army chief: "Dear sir, With reference to our telephone conversation of a few days back, I am hereby forwarding a written proposal for your perusal. We at the Post would like to do a photo feature on the making of an Indian paratrooper: to put one of our writers through the course and see whether he can make it. In the competitive news environment we face, the treatment that we give to our future stories is important, hence the rather offbeat request. But its our sincere belief that the piece would be a great image-building exercise for the army and do much to bolster its own efforts to draw top-notch talent through its gates. Yours sincerely, MM."

The request was granted in February 1999, after you pushed hard and greased the army's public relations officer, who, an ex-9 Para himself but now an army headquarters memorandum expert, kept looking at you weirdly all three times you met him and asked each time, "Are you sure of this?" Of course you were then. If he had spelled out in vivid terms what you were getting into, you might have been a little less sure.

But now that your sorry ass is in, you plan to stick it out to the end, make your jumps even if you have a pound of blisters on each foot. You have your reasons.

Sergeant Major Islamuddin is really enjoying putting you through the paces. He thinks of guys like you as soft ass to regulate, show what a tough

guy he is. Do some show-off. He is now coming back through the runners to see what's with you. He thinks you are regular army grade four.

"What's up?" he asks. "Running out of gas? You want to go back a week, repeat the whole \*\*\*\*ing thing with the next batch coming in?" It's in Sergeant Major Islamuddin's interest to kick your ass through the fitness course before the army lets you even touch a parachute. Maybe that gives him some career motion. But the talk is, he likes only new faces in his basic fitness program. He doesn't like leftovers to fill in the new guys in advance about what a bastard he is. He likes them to discover for themselves.

You are not part of the regular 9 Para course, but the one they run for officers from other regiments, a kind of contingency reserve they have a policy of building up. That saves you all the 9 Para advanced hocus-pocus that you are convinced would send you straight to sick bay in two days flat. But even though they have condensed their drills and tabs into a diluted version of the big \*\*\*\* routine they run on their own lads it's still enough to screw your bicycle, give you a high-fatigue RPM.

What no one wants to do is have a second crack of Sergeant Major Islamuddin's fitness regimen, give him the opportunity to tinker with your biorhythm, reprogram it permanently with his 5:00 A.M. PT.

You get up and wobble along on the one and a half legs at your disposal, but then you say, "What the hell, \*\*\*\* the toe. You pick up speed and find you can move into higher gear because

the pain isn't as bad as before. Major (Dr.) Sandy has worked some magic.

It's a different point altogether that none of this blister shit would have happened if Sergeant Major Islamuddin hadn't told you to stuff your Nike power joggers in your locker the first day of your hitting base. The army likes its boys in leather boots. Likes to give them a shot at stress fracture in their first fortnight of marching and tabs. The guys in your batch have been wearing them for years. You haven't.

"Watch out for tendinitis," one of your batch mates from Jat Regiment warns you. "That's even worse than a stress fracture."

"What's that?" you ask him. "It sounds like a cow disease."

He looks at you with pity. "The muscles at the back of your ankles flame up from stretching too much. You be careful. I got it at the Academy. Got it in both legs. Couldn't walk for a week."

You don't know how to be careful to avoid tendinitis, but it's at the back of your head, so you try some fancy running steps that you think will keep you free from tendinitis. Then you get blisters instead. That's not as bad as all four of you, who are packed into this L-shaped army-hostel accommodation, taking off your boots at one go after a tab. Dogs, you read somewhere, pack a sense of smell that's a thousand times more sensitive than a human's. You are sure if a dog came sniffing in at that time, it would die.