Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay's "Obhoyer Onidra"

Obhoy's Insomnia

TRANSLATED BY SOHANA MANZOOR

An abrupt noise woke Obhoy up in the middle of the night and throughout the rest of the night his eyelids would not shut. What was the matter with him? He had been sound asleep; then suddenly he woke up as if someone was battering at the gate of his senses. Slowly, Obhoy sat up on his bed and lit the oil lamp. He looked around the room; everything seemed perfectly alright. What was he so afraid of then?

He sat still and tried to listen. No, there was no sound. He was worried for no good reason.

Then his gaze fell on the empty space on his bed. Even seven days ago, someone used to sleep there. Three years earlier, he had married Bokul. There had been a full moon in the sky just as it was today. His mother was alive then and they were all happy together. Then one day, his mother died. Bokul took up the responsibilities of his household. Initially, it was difficult for her, but she learnt fast. She was able to replace his mother only too well. She did everything herself—from keeping the accounts to cooking and washing. She got up early in the morning and worked till midnight. She had no time to visit her parents even. Obhoy could not tolerate being without her for a day. The next-door neighbor Champa had observed once, "O dear, you look awful!"

"I have so much to do, you know," replied Bokul.

Champa said, "You could work a little less, I'm sure."

Bokul answered as a complacently happy housewife, "How can I work less? It's my home and my family. Even if death comes to take me today, I have to ask him to wait."

Champa shuddered, "What kind of talk is that?"

"Don't worry. Death won't take me."

So, Bokul had brought order in Obhoy's disorderly household. Not only that, people said that he even had fallen in love with his wife. Obhoy, who couldn't bear to live without his friends, stopped visiting them after his marriage. His friends made fun of him, but he pretended as if he did not hear anything.

As days passed, Obhoy's friends began to shun him. Nobody saw him frolicking with friends or colleagues after office. His friends also stopped visiting him. Obhoy seemed relaxed and happy. Bokul asked, "Why don't your friends come any more?"

Obhoy laughed uproariously. "Too much expense, my dear."

Bokul said, "But you know, everyone is going to blame me for your transformation."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that people will think I've made you stop all these."

Obhoy laughed again, "Let them."

Within two months of her marriage Bokul had understood that her husband was quite a miser. Marriage basically gave him an opportunity to get rid of his friends.

Slowly, three years passed by. Then one night, Bokul became ill. On Wednesday night, she called out to her husband. Obhoy asked, "W- what's wrong?"

Bokul whimpered, "I feel so cold… ahh.. ooh.. close all the doors and windows. Let me have the quilt, all my clothes too. Oh, God, why is it so c..co…old? Give me everything in the house…"

Obhoy put everything he had on her. Still, she felt cold. Obhoy put his palm on her forehead and felt she was burning. It was late at night; where could he go? Should he call in a doctor? But that meant he would have to spend money. Meanwhile, Bokul kept on screaming, "O I am burning… O..O..O."

Obhoy said to himself, "She went to bed all good. What happened? Is it Malaria? I'm sure it's just Malaria."

By this time, Bokul had started uttering gibberish.

Obhoy felt miserable. He sat by his dear wife and fanned her through the night. He was ready to do anything that required physical labour. But he certainly was not going to spend money for nothing. In the morning, a local doctor was called in. The doctor took time in examining Bokul and passed the verdict that she had typhoid. And it was a difficult case too. She needed a lot of care.

Obhoy was horrified. He felt like crying his heart out. But instead of doing so he became magnanimous and spent ten taka on his wife. If Bokul had lived longer, he would have to spend more. But to save her loving husband from extra expenditure, the considerate wife died the very next day.

Obhoy fell on the floor, crying and whimpering like a woman. His precious home had fallen like a house of cards. He had failed miserably to protect his wife, and hence the only option for him was to wail at the top of his voice. His friends from the old days came to console him. They had carefully avoided Obhoy through the last three years, but the situation was different now. Seeing him cry so piteously, all of them shed tears too.

After burning her at the funeral pyre everybody went home in the evening.

* * *

People said that Obhoy's love for his wife was sublime. Bokul would often laugh at him and ask, "What would you do when I die?"

"I'll build a Tajmahal for you."

"Oh, please, don't spend all your money on me."

Obhoy would say, "All that I have is yours. What's so great about it?"

"Okay, so we have tons of money? Why don't you go and get a fancy soap for me?"

"You want to spend four anas and a half on bubbles?" Obhoy chided his wife. "No, no, we can't afford that kind of luxury here."

Now that Bokul was gone, Obhoy barely ate for six days and six nights. His friends and relatives were worried over him. They tried to console him in every possible way.

Finally, after six days and nights he was able to think of his surroundings, and he fell asleep. That is when he heard the loud sound and woke up in the middle of the night. He gazed at the empty space where Bokul used to sleep and his entire being screamed.

Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind. He hoped his dead wife was not back. Poor Obhoy felt goose bumps all over his body. He certainly was not ready for that kind of love.

Then he heard the sound again. Someone was pushing the door from outside. Obhoy jumped up and looked through the hole. In sheer astonishment he spied a fat rat pressing itself in desperation at his door before finally disappearing round the corner.

Obhoy heaved a sigh of relief. He decided to take out his key and see if everything was in order. While looking through the list, he felt thirsty and almost called for his wife. Then he remembered that Bokul was gone. Now he would have to get a servant and pay at least ten taka per month as salary. He shuddered at the thought of the huge amount accumulating by the end of the year.

It was two at night. Obhoy was ransacking his boxes, his hair disheveled, his eyes bulging out from sockets; he was perspiring heavily. He fell on his wife's side of the bed and wept with abandonment. He looked at the single photograph of Bokul, hanging on the wall. It was old and faded as it was taken quite a while ago.

The clock struck three. Was he going mad over his deceased wife? He threaded his fingers through his longish hair. He opened the window and looked out into the moonlit night. Obhoy felt a sense of vast emptiness inside him.

He had spent the last six days and nights in fear and suspense.

Taking out his wife's jewellery box he started going through its content against the list he had. No, that particular item was surely missing. Tears ran freely down Obhoy's cheeks. He felt cheated. He had taken everything off Bokul's body before the cremation; everything except the pair of gold earrings she always wore. Hidden beneath her dark locks they had travelled with her to the funeral pyre.

Obhoy could endure the pain of losing his wife, but the loss of the gold earrings proved too much. Whenever he closed his eyes, the earrings appeared in his dreams with a vicious brightness that did not allow him to sleep.

Didn't they say that wives of the fortunate die early? Obhoy kept awake through the night wondering how and why fortune eluded him at the death of his wife. (*Abridged*)

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The Plague in Bengal: Literary Glimpses and Anecdotes

ABHISHEK SARKAR

About 122 years before the Covid-19 pandemic Bengal was struck by bubonic plague, which has left its traces in Bangla fiction and life writings. Punyalata Chakraborty recalls in her memoir *Chhelebelar Dinguli* (Childhood Days; 1958) that Rabindranath Tagore had once come to their residence to meet her father Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury and was then going by foot to meet his friend Jagadish Chandra Bose who lived nearby. Rabindranath returned unexpectedly, to report that he had spotted a dead rat lying on the pavement. He suspected that the rat had died of plague and feared that it might infect the passersby and the children playing near it. Rabindranath felt reassured only after Upendrakishore had the rat's carcass burnt down with kerosene oil. Punyalata's uncles were all praise for the poet, noticing that he was not lost in the world of thoughts but had a cautious eye on everything.

The first official case of bubonic plague in Kolkata was registered in April 1898. By 30th June 1900 the number of deaths from the disease in the city was 10,997, but the actual figure was probably around 13,000. Plague did not linger in Bengal like malaria or cholera and eastern Bengal was largely spared, but it raged over a decade or so. It was scary enough to haunt the popular imagination for a long time. Plague stands for great alarm whenever it is mentioned in Bengali literature.

Abanindranath Tagore recalls in *Jorasankor Dhare* (Near Jorasanko; 1944) that his uncle Rabindranath joined hands with Sister Nivedita to inspect Kolkata neighbourhoods during the epidemic. Rabindranath also started a private hospital for plague sufferers. This experience is reflected in Rabindranath's *Chaturanga* (Four Quartets; 1916). In the novel, a saintly atheist named Jagamohan refuses to escape to Kalna when the epidemic hits the city. He does not listen to his brother, the selfish and bigoted Harimohan. Instead, he converts his house into a private hospital to treat the poor Muslim leatherworkers of the locality. In the process, Jagamohan himself succumbs to the disease.

Jagamohan had to start a private hospital since he had found from his inspection of the government plague hospital that it treated patients like criminals. In fact, people feared the high-handed and obtrusive government officers more than the disease itself. Besides, people were concerned about preserving the purity of caste and the dignity of their womenfolk when faced with the possibility of medical inspection or forced admission to plague hospitals. Rumours circulated freely that the British government would inspect and inoculate all people by force. The suppression of plague was seen by many as an elaborate ploy for the conversion of Indians to Christianity. In view of this, the "Plague Manifesto" distributed by the Ramakrishna Mission in 1899 requested citizens not to panic or spread rumours. It tried to reassure them,"There will be no lack of effort in treating the afflicted patients in our hospital under our special care and supervision, paying full respect to religion, caste and the modesty (Purdah) of women." Saratchandra Chattopadhyay in *Srikanta* (1917) gives an account of the embarrassment caused by the open inspection of Rangoon-bound passengers at the Koilaghat jetty for plague. The narrator observes that the British doctor was touching and examining uninhibitedly such parts of the men's bodies (meaning, the glands in the armpits and the groin) as would mortify even a wooden puppet. The narrator adds, the "civilized" Indians were standing still after flinching only once under such treatment, but any other race would not rest before breaking the doctor's arm.

The novel *Chaturanga* seems to be unsympathetic towards Kolkatans who fled from the city for dear life. Similarly, the "Plague Manifesto" of the Ramakrishna Mission asserts, "Let the wealthy runaway! But we are poor; we understand the heartache of the poor. The Mother of the Universe is Herself the support of the helpless." It is recorded that the fare of palanquin and horse carriage rose fourfold to eightfold in response to the exodus of householders from Kolkata. Some, who could not afford even a bullock cart because of the inflated price and did not want to walk all the way, resorted to a scavenger's cart for moving out. However, this mass departure brings a refreshing change to the life of the feisty, proto-feminist heroine in the novel *Subarnalata* (1964) by Ashapurna Devi. Plague allows Subarnalata to take a train ride for the first time in her life. She also gets to live in the lap of nature for a while away from the claustrophobic house of her in-laws.

Pratham Alo (First Light, volume 2, 1997) by Sunil Gangopadhyay provides a snapshot of this exodus as seen by Rabindranath on his way from the Howrah Bridge to Park Street. The novel reports that non-Bengalis were rushing towards the Howrah railway station whereas those from eastern Bengal were making a beeline for the Sealdah station to escape the city. *Pratham Alo* also describes the brutal measures taken by the colonial police in the Kolkata slums in the name of checking the spread of the disease. It further mentions violent confrontations between the police and the local mob in Beleghata, Khidirpur, Baghbazar and Maniktala arising out of the government's approach to the disease.

All these accounts of the plague in Kolkata date from a time when the scare of the disease was a thing of the past, while the playlet *Ashrudhara* (The Shower of Tears; 1901) by Girish Chandra Ghosh was produced during the plague years. Curiously, the disease is personified as a character in this playlet, which was produced to lament the demise of Queen Victoria. It shows three friends, namely, Famine, Plague and Anarchy, jeering at the loyal Indian mourners and nurturing rosy hopes about their future exploits. Plague reports that Queen Victoria, a darling of God, had tearfully prayed to Him to rid the world of the pandemic. It is for this reason that she was sent from heaven to rule over the British Empire. Later, Plague indicates that his local address is in Burrabazar in Kolkata. He seems to have access even to the viceroy's palace. The playlet concludes with the hope that Victoria's son and heir will be as magnanimous and efficient as the mother. *Ashrudhara* premiered at the Classic Theatre on 26 January 1901, where the role of Plague was essayed by one Natabar Choudhury.

The most striking and gruesome picture of the plague in Kolkata is deftly provided by the novel *Kolkatar Kachhei* (Not Far from Kolkata; 1957) by Gajendra Kumar Mitra. The novel revolves around the fortunes of Rasmani, a pious and courageous high-caste Hindu widow. She goes to the Nimtala Ghat every morning at 4 o'clock to take a bath in the holy river. When the police prohibit access to the ghat because of the raging plague, she starts going there at 3 o'clock. One morning she steps on a half-burnt, headless corpse caught at the foot of the steps in the river. She realizes what it is - the corpse had to be dumped into the river because a funeral pyre could not be allowed to burn for more than two hours owing to the excess of corpses. But Rasmani is neither scared nor disgusted. On the contrary, she is full of reverence for the corpse. She is convinced that the corpse is as holy as Lord Shiva himself since it has been purified by the touch of fire and immersed in the sacred river.

Religion had a monumental role to play in the contemporary Bengali people's approach to plague. Premankur Atorthy reports in his memoir *Mahasthabir Jatak* that there was a rumour about the goddess of plague relocating to Kolkata from Bombay by the railway. However, she was not officially inducted into the Hindu pantheon. The "Plague Manifesto" of the Ramakrishna Mission specifies, "In order to remove the fear of the epidemic, you should sing Nâma Sankirtanam (the name of the Lord) every evening and in every locality." Besides, a letter to *The Indian Mirror* from an educated Bengali (published as a pamphlet in 1898) proposed a general day of prayer across all denominations. Generally speaking, people in Bengal have departed from such widespread, public religiosity during the Covid-19 pandemic and have privileged medical dictates over piety.

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