

Reflections of Subalterns' in Partite Bengal's Selected Short Stories: 1990 – 2000

Dr. Amit Kumar Nandi

Abstract

Bengali short story has gone through numerous modifications with the passage of time in both the divisions of Bengal. There have been great changes in the form, language, emotion and subject matter since its inception, till date. On the one hand, it has become a chronicle of the struggles of the marginalised, on the other; there is a tendency to showcase the local language and culture in these stories. Thus, the stories that had started off as records of the high society are now focusing on people of the lower strata of society.

The marginalised have, till now, not so found a place in history. But it is only fitting that the plight of the common man is narrated by author, because Author and Literature has no commitment to the nation, he is bound by duty to the society. My paper concentrates on the rise of the marginalised people in the Bengali short story. I will analyse a few short stories from both ends of Bengal to look at this issue.

Keywords: Subaltern, Undivided Bengal, Short Story, Marginalised, etc.

Taking up the role of pioneer of short stories in Bengali, Rabindranath Tagore had shown the guiding lamp to others (1861- 1941). However, prior to ignite the lamp there has to be some toil to prepare the wick for ignition. In an attempt to pursue the resources of this illumination, one could find the sprout of short stories in the works of Purnachandra Chattopadhyay, Swarnakumari Devi (1855- 1932), Nagendranath Gupta (1861- 1940) etc. Post World War I era added a new dimension to the genre of Bengali short stories. This age has been entitled as 'Kallol Era' in the history of Bengali literature. Short stories of this era replicated the intensity of World War I and its repercussions on human lives afterwards. Till now Bengali short stories were under a havoc influence of Tagore and somewhat maintained a distance from the subalterns and their problems. In this new era, these dilemmas began to reflect in the Bengali short stories. Magazines played the exponential role to bring up the problems of these marginalised mass in short stories. The periodicals which played most significant roles to materialise this task were 'Kallol' (1923 A.D.), 'Kalikalam' (1926 A.D.), 'Shonibarar Chithhi' (1924 A.D.), 'Bharatbarsho' (1913 A.D.), 'Probashi' (1901 A.D.), 'Bichitra' (1927 A.D.) etc. The contemporary predicaments in second, third and fourth decades of twentieth century India came up in the short stories

State Aided College Teacher, Department of Bengali, Derozio Memorial College, Rajarhat Road, Kolkata - 700136, West Bengal

published by them. A conscious effort to come free from the influence of Tagore could be observed in the short stories of this age. Decaying values, disappointments and psychological hazards, breaking of the joint families, troubles of poverty, negativity and hesitations, romantic hallucinations etc. set a vivid mental backdrop for the contemporary authors. Some writers came up with the difficulties of real life and the path of redemption from them, in their stories. Some authors attempted to find out solutions of the dilemmas through the philosophies suggested by Marx and Freud. World War II and its hazardous outcomes of communal disharmony and partition directed the stream of Bengali short stories into a fresh dimension. This turmoil torn apart the entire Bengali society as well as the nation. Contemporary famines, black outs, degeneration of war affected society, partitions, riot, the refugee problems etc. prominently reflected in short stories of that era.

15th August, 1947 could be marked as a turning point in the history of India. By using the difference in religious identities, the colonialists sabotaged partition of India into two pieces- India & Pakistan. It took a lot of struggle and bloodshed for East Pakistan to independent Bangladesh- a new lingua nation, in the year of 1971. The atrocities of partition became an eternal wound for us, which bleeds still today. The partition of Bengal, even today historically stands in the witness box of facts. In spite of the control of Governmental authorities on the political boundaries, the cultural tree of both parts of Bengal, originated from the same soil-bed. From the viewpoint of social, political and cultural dogmas, both parts of divided Bengal share more similarities than dissimilarities. Though the relation apparently remained same between these two parts, it got different dimensions added. These new connotations of relationship emerged as huge waves of transformation in contemporary literature. Political unrest hit both parts of Bengal. The turbulence affected societies of both parts and left a deep impact in the contemporary literature. Various revolts in both parts of Bengal came up prominently in short stories of several writers. It means that the various levels of political transformation such as partition and other unrests were determining or altering dimensions of society and literature. Just like the struggle for establishing language and liberation mutiny left intense impact on the literature of Bangladesh, some remarkable revolts in the Indian part of Bengal such as revolt for Food, Tebhaga, Naxalite movements imprinted their footprints in contemporary literature. Post-independence era got new envisages in its literary world due to severity of different socio-political, cultural and economic restlessness.

Post-independence era indicated towards a fresh direction in Bengali short stories. The litterateurs in this part of Bengal could not stay aloof from the plights and miseries of the other part. The miseries of individual got metamorphosed into the tale of communities. The fragments of the other part of Bengal took a different shape in the short stories in this part. “An iconoclastic trait took charge in the domain of short stories written in this time. It could be observed in the end of Sharatchandra’s style of story- telling, the end of Bohemian tales imparted mostly by the Kallol era writers, end of the naturalistic romanticism of Bibhutibhusan etc., and this vacuum was filled up by the new generation of young writers. These young Turks had witnessed the bloodshed and corpses, absolute degeneration of human values, the drastic economic downfall and how partition directed human lives in to abyss of uncertainties. These experiences yielded a new worldview to this new age writers and inspired them to write about transformed dimensions of affected people. These post-independence traits in short stories of Bengal must be remembered.”¹ This psychological background indicated a fresh direction in short stories of Bengal. Language, style of narration, subjects- everything went through a drastic change. “Not only had the subject, context and environment- short stories in this time acquired a new structure.”² Therefore, in order to uphold the unrest of time and space, short stories had to mould itself in new shape and size. “These transformations certainly demand a rapt attention from the short story writers. This is the destiny of any form of art. Short story is such a medium of expression which inevitably and naturally goes through swift changes. Short stories mainly delve on various fragments of life which depends on social realities. In order to replicate these fragmental hues of life short story in much intense than novels.”³

The other part of Bengal went through much bloodshed in demand of a new linguistic nation state, which finally yielded to an independent Bangladesh. After the partition in 1947, a wave of unrest could be observed in both parts of Bengal. Rather, Bangladesh faced new colonial challenges after acquiring freedom from the clutches of neo-colonialism. This delivered a deep identity crisis to the people of the newly formed nation. Since the inception, Bengali literature had a single identity on the basis of language; but post partition era gave in a tendency to develop a difference in the literary works of Bangladesh. “It happened because, under the rule of newly formed government, the other part of Bengal itself became a new reality. Actually the word Bangladesh itself imparts a new linguistic identity and added a new dimension to the notion of nation. Therefore, whenever this identity of ‘Bangladeshi’ is formed, it becomes evident that how deep is its impact on the ideological foundation of literature, nation and language.”

⁴ Staying almost like refugees in own country, the people of Bangladesh faced miseries of society, politics, economy and culture. The authors of this part of Bengal could not turn their faces away from the plight of their counterpart. Flow of nationalism began to overwhelm through the medium of language and it was inevitable in order to build an independent Bangladesh. It was reflected in contemporary short stories written in this time and the salient features of age old story telling had already become saturated. Intellectual plots became a new part of short stories of this time. Simultaneously as another effect of language revolution many writers began to use ornamentation in their stories. The everyday life of people became an intricate part in these short stories. As the wheels of time moved ahead, the short stories started to exhibit more intense symbolic connotation and the shape and content began to revolve too. Till this time the short stories upheld the atrocities and the plight faced by people, but now the stories started manifest how those people turned around against adversities.

By the eighth decade of Twentieth century a new analytical style was added in literary world- the study and role of subalterns which was unavoidable in the given socio political and economic reality. In the ninth decade of this century, the beckoning of globalisation greatly influenced contemporary Indian as well as Bengali culture. "Colonies started to take new forms and in disguise of modernism several influential cultural transformations started to take the society into its clutches. Individual and corporate capitalism started to affect the innate human nature."⁵ Foreign goods began to dominate the markets. A class of opportunistic traders sprouted in this time. The extravagant luxuries of the western world deeply influenced the youths of both urban and rural parts. Alcohol and other drugs along with lechery were grossly saleable. These experiences were exchanged between the authors in both parts of Bengal. New Media or Print Media and Electronic media, internet, blogs etc. catered a new way to understand these newly added traits in Bengali short stories. Contemporary little magazines could not pay much attention to short stories; therefore popular news dailies became a medium of dependence for the short story writers. Colloquial dialect became a prominent part of these short stories. The short stories became multi- faceted with the growing problems of social discrimination, selfishness of the political leaders, unemployment, poverty, lack of education, rape, religious strictures which altogether represent thorough erosion in society. Besides national crisis, international turmoil also reflected themselves in short stories in both parts of Bengal.

The evaluation of literature could not be framed always by time and space. 1990- 2000

A.D. show umpteen numbers of short stories. May be according to the scale of time and space they are different, but still the literary value of those stories are equally important for both ends of Bengal. Now in the concerned decade, the space of the author could be the identity for his narratives and through this way of research we would try to analyse some selected short stories to establish my points. In order to support my title I would like to draw attention towards the similarities which both part of Bengal share such as geographical, social, economic, and cultural and last but not the least- the linguistic unities. In small space of a research article, it is a difficult task to discuss about all the short stories and their respective authors, therefore I chose to discuss about a selected few.

In Bengali literature, especially in Bengali narratives- it had already become a trait to discuss about the subalterns in the ninth decade of twentieth century. Post Kallol era literature previously replicated the facts about subalterns of both parts of Bengal, although Bangladeshi literature did not acquire its current identity by then. As example, the literary works by Tarashankar Bandopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay, Bhibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay, Sailajananada Mukhopadhyay, Jagadish Gupta, Pramatha Chowdhury, Amarendranath Ghosh, Premendra Mitra, Achintyakumar Sengupta, Satinath Bhaduri, Advaita Mallabharman, Jyotirindra Nandi, Narendranath Mitra, Samaresh Basu, Mahasweta Devi etc. – the issues regarding marginalised subalterns came up prominently. In post independence Indian part of Bengali literature, the works by Abdul Jabbar, Syad Mustafa Siraj, Prafulla Roy, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Shirsendu Mukhopadhyay, Debesh Roy, Abhijit Sen, Sadhan Chattopadhyay, Samaresh Majumdar, Tapan Bandopadhyay, Bhagirath Mishra, Jhareswar Chattopadhyay, Swapnamoy Chakraborty echoed the tales of the marginalised people. In the other part of Bengal the same topic was largely discussed in the works by Sauqat Osman, Syaad Waliullah, Akhtarujjaman Ilias, Abu Ishak, Sauqat Ali, Hasan Ajijul Haq, Selina Hosein, Satyen Sen, Mahmudul Haq, Haripada Dutta, Syaad Samsul Haq, Rashid Haider, Al Mahmud, Biprodas Barua etc.

The study of subalterns not only echoed in short stories but it was vividly narrated in novels as well and this practice had already begun from first half of twentieth century. Now the question is- ‘who this marginalised are or subalterns?’ It could be said that “the term ‘subaltern’ was initially used in military regimen. The subordinates under a captain were called ‘subalterns’. However, the general meaning of the word is subordinate. According to Aristotelian dogma, it means a vow which is taken under another bigger oath, which may be certain or abstract but

not a holistic one, rather a part.”⁶ In this context, it could be opined that the way ‘subaltern’ is depicted in literature is much apart from the meaning that dictionary provides. Kallol era and post Kallol age found a profound influence of Marxist philosophy which says that subalterns are those people about whom literary world had not discussed yet- the so called backward rural class of people. Gramsci used the term ‘subaltern’ with a twofold connotation. “According to Gramsci on the one hand it is directly a synonym of ‘proletariat’; on the other hand, it means the working class in a capitalistic socio economic system. According to the social hierarchy this working class gets exploited. According to this meaning of subaltern, on the opposite pole of this working class is the Bourgeoisie class or the capitalists. This theory by Gramsci plays a pivotal role in further analysis and understanding of Marxist philosophy.”⁷ These explanations clearly indicate the metamorphosis of the word ‘subaltern’. The ninth decade of twentieth century distinctly showed those classes of people as subalterns who were constantly deprived and almost exiled by the nation state or centre of power. Here the society diverges into “WE” and “THEY”. WE denote the privileged urban classes who according to the parameters of intellectual and social establishment have moved far ahead in mainstream. On the other hand THEY mean those people who are not enlightened or civilised with the amenities of modernism. THEY are not the part of so called mainstream and stay under the abyss of backwardness.

In Bengali narratives, especially in the novels the subalterns had already made their place in the works by Rabindranath Tagore and his other contemporaries. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay vividly depicted the tales of subalterns in his narratives. Tarashankar Bandopadhyay’s *Hansulibanker Upakatha* not only speaks about the lifestyle of the ‘Kahar’ community or a mere depiction of marginalised people; rather it replicates the conflict between two classes of society, generation gap, two epochs and the inception of capitalism through the characters of Banoari and Karali. From this conflict we can see the struggle of Karali to establish the identity of his respective society and save the interest of his people. Similarly, *Padmanadir Majhi* by Manik Bandopadhyay, *Koylakuthhi* by Sailajananda Mukhopadhyay, *Dhoraicharit Manas* by Satinath Bhaduri, *Titas Ekti Nadir Naam* by Advaita Mallabarman, *Ganga* by Samaresh Basu, *Aranyer Adhikar* by Mahasweta Devi, *Tistaparer Brittanto* by Debesh Roy echo the same message. On the other hand, the literary works by the writers of Bangladesh narrate same issues such as, *Lal Shalu* by Syaad Waliullah, *Chilekothhar Sepai* by Akhtarujjaman Ilias, *Surjo Dighol Bari* by Abu Ishac etc.

The narratives of Bengal in ninth decade of twentieth century depict the immense plight and miseries of subalterns. In stories like the short stories collection ‘Sonda Mati Nona Jol’ by Abdul Jabbar, the struggle of marginalised class in 24 Paraganas came up prominently. A story from this collection ‘Sagar Dwiper Mahajan’ shows that the money lenders are much fearsome than tigers of Sunderban. On the other hand another story from the same collection ‘Shikar’ deals with a stark class contrast between the so called civilised people with their meanness and the tormented exploited subalterns. ‘Nagmati’- a story by Prafulla Roy narrates about various types of professions taken up by the subalterns. “This story also tells the tales of gypsies. This story also reveals the psychological layers of women of this class. Every year in winter these groups of gypsies used to come near the inhabitation of Sonai Bibi’s lake to trade their stuffs like medicated roots, handcrafts made of cane etc. besides their skills to cure the serpent bit patients. Gypsy woman Sankhini was expert in all these skills. The Rajasaheb wooed a gypsy girl Palanki, this makes Sankhini jealous. Palanki wants to become a traditional house wife whereas Sankhini cannot leave back her salient territory. Several times Palanki and Rajasaheb meet warmly under the shade of the Piyal tree, Sankhini, when comes to know about it punishes Palanki by burning her skin with a hot iron rod. In order to fulfil her vengeance, Sankhini takes initiative to marry Palanki with Rajasaheb and cunningly opens the lid of venomous cobra near Rajasaheb while performing the ritual of garland exchanging. Rajasaheb is bitten by the serpent and slowly collapses. After realising her blunder Sankhini cries hard.”⁸ Sunil Gangopadhyay’s short stories could also be discussed in this context such as ‘Mahaprithibi’, ‘Haridaspure Gachher Chhayay’ etc. “The theme of Mahaprithibi’s is lifelyle of lower backward class peoples. The imaginations of the character Kushi dominates ‘Mahaprithibi’. Sensuality has arrived in places according to the need of plot. ‘Haridaspure Gachher Chhayay’ depicts the simplicities of rural life. In this story we get widower Dinanath a small roadside tea stall owner. He is 41 who lives with a small boy Bulu- brother of his late wife. Once a rich woman tried to snatch Bulu from Dinanath in hope to get a cheap servant. On the other hand this story describes another group of people who come to rural side in weekend just to enjoy alcohol with the platter of rural sensuality of village girls. Fragmented incidents cater the readers with a wholesome experience of helplessness.”⁹ Jyotsnamoy Ghosh also wrote about the marginalised class of society. “The story ‘Chatta 50’ by him, tells the story of tribals. The story is neatly woven. The human inhabitants of jungle are main subject here. The use of language is also striking, such as, “Near about fifty years ago there was congested jangle full of Shal, Shishu, Mahul’s tree. ‘Yes there

were! I am saying, their Mukhiya, Titri. Though there is no humanity.”

‘If you ask, were, but where is that? My dear son, there are, there is a story. When total earth was divided by God and distributed to the all human beings and animals then we people got only small hills and jungles.’”¹⁰ (“Sē’i pañcāśa bachara āgē śāla śīśu mahulēra ja[āja]i jaEgala chila. ‘Chila ha! Āmi balachi, tādēra mukhi ā rē, titari. Tabu mānabika nā’i.”

‘Yadi śudhā’ō, chila, tō gēla ka’i? Āchē bāpa, si bittānta’ō āchē. Sasāgarā pithibi bu[hābābā yakhana bhāga-bāmō ārā karē dilēna saba jībajantura bhitara, takhana mōdēra bhāgē pa[ala milhā āra jaEgala).

On the other hand the progressing society and literature come hand in hand in a story by Sadhan Bandopadhyay- ‘Bobaye Haat Dhora’. “The protagonist Basanta is a sufferer amidst the confinement of urban poverty stricken working class. The description is very transparent and lively, such as, “... though Basanta is not very much selfish persons. Although he takes a little bit bribes, cheap drags but he is well wisher for common people. He gives manitary help for people, attend meetings and in holidays he keeps information of his neighbours. But he understand that an aristocracy lifestyle gradually grow up where he stays. everybody become more and more selfcentred. So in spare time he involved himself for gardening.”¹¹ (“... Tabē basanta khuba ēkamā sbārthapara mānuca na a. Ēkamu-ādhamu ghuca khā a bamē, sastā khōmjāra nēśā’ō āchē, kintu janagaGēra ēkamā kichu hōka-sē cā a. Cāmdā dē a, mimin ē

ākalē āsē, pratibēśīrā kē kēmana āchē chumira dina khōmja khabara’ō nē a. Kintu ōra pā[āmā a ēkhana umhati ē?yārismrōkēsira hā’ō ā. Bisēca pāttā pā a nā basanta. Yē yāra nijēkē ni ē āchē. Basanta bā[ira umhōnē, chumira dina, tā’i bēla, gandharājēra bāgāna tairi karē.”) It shows the assemety between the rich and poor where the poors are also trying hard to acquire a higher identity in a capitalistic backdrop.

On the other hand in the other part of Bengal- stories like ‘Sodh’ by Papri Rahaman narrates the tale of three characters who belong from the oppressed subaltern class. The everyday life of daily wage earners reflect in this story. The male character of Mohor Ali is abandoned by his wife from first marriage Ifu. Mohor Ali doesn’t understand the reason behind it. She comes back to him afterwards. She had killed her two newborn babies soon after their birth. Mohor Ali thinks Ifu has goen insane. Without divorcing her he remarries another woman Hasna. This accentuates Ifu’s eccentricity. One night Ifu urinates in Mohor Ali’s bed and leaves before the dawn. In the whole story it doesnot become clear to the readers why Ifu acts like that...

whether she married Mohor Ali to avenge him about something or she generally hated men. The restlessness of contemporary society is somewhat expressed through eccentricities of Ifu.

Shahidul Jahir's 'Kathhure o Dnarkak' expresses bourgeoisie through metaphors and symbolism. The story takes the readers through door of mystery where the crows of the city are vanishing somewhere all of a sudden and gradually it is revealed that these crows are not actually birds. The metaphor of crows actually represents the subalterns. The two important characters in this story - Akalu and Tepi cannot step forward with the glittery lifestyle of city, hence they are greatly disappointed. Though they could earn some good amount of money in village but soon are looted by few cunning people around. Even in city they are cheated by so called 'friend'. Helplessly they start selling eggs of crow and the stuffs brought by crows. One night being tormented by neighbors they are forced to leave the city and the crows also accompany them. This story shows that a class of people is compelled at first to leave their villages in search of job then they also get exploited once they visit city. Crow here represents the subalterns and cuckoo stands for privileged class. The eternal struggle of crow and high class lavish life of cuckoo upholds the stark contrast between the marginalized subalterns and the urban privileged class.

After a long gap of 14 years story teller Mahmudul Haq set a new benchmark in short story writing of Bangladesh by introducing new subject, form and representation in his short story 'Bonoful'. Mother of nine children widow Ambia's lifeline were her two sons Lalmia and Kalachand and daughter Maina. Rest of her children was sacrificed on the altar of society and politics and Ambia could not find even trace of their corpses. Ambia is shaken when the local money lender breaks the heads and hands of her sons Lalmia and Kalachand. The atrocities made on her children strikes deep in Ambia's heart, though she could not feed them properly. In spite of buying milk by her hard earned savings she is tortured by the local money lender. The remnant of her meager money is snatched by a local goon. She saves the jar of milk somehow, but that milk too could not reach her children as her heart is melt by an abandoned feeble old man lying in the corner of the street and she feeds him by that milk. The old man blesses her by saying that may lord make her a queen someday. At night, lying down in her bed, Ambia dreams of heaven, where she finds herself dressed like a queen. However, she does not want to go anywhere, leaving her children. The severe tortures by her husband Rahamatullah could never make her cry, but her eyes welled up when she thought of getting separated from her children. The comforts of heaven could not allure her. Here a mother from the marginalized class is not enticed towards any kind of mortal or immortal comfort because she wanted to be with her children.

At last we can conclude by saying that literature is an ever changeable area under discussion. According to the transformation of society and time literature changes its form. Time and society are the fuel of literature. The mind- set of a litterateur metamorphoses itself according to the nick of time, society and space. Therefore it was inevitable that Bengali short stories will change itself from the initiative form of its inception. The form, shape, content, subject matter, language, background etc. were repeatedly experimented by the short story tellers. The subject matter of short stories shifted from its inception to various other topics gradually. As society cannot free itself from civilization and science, similarly literature could also never shake off the effects of globalization and automation. Therefore it is not possible to determine where in future the genre of short stories will stand.

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