

AN ATTEMPT TO RELOCATE AN ECO FEMININITY BETWEEN THE LINES OF RABINDRANATH'S MUKTADHARA

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ABSTRACT

The concept that the term gender in general, and “woman” in particular, are troubled terms constantly being relocated in the complex matrix of actual, symbolic, linguistic/cultural, socio historical and many other significances/meanings struck me during a casual reading of the play “Muktadhara” composed by Rabindranath Thakur with its power of confronting the readers with an overwhelming consciousness of an absent presence of something/one whose concrete/actual embodiment is interestingly absent in the text itself - the femininity/woman-ness. The play does not construct many significant flesh-and-blood woman figures, but femininity, rather a female-ness, makes its power felt through both the ideologies and architectonics of the text.

Long before Eco Feminism got established as a sustained systematic theory, here the “woman” exists as nature, but her presence is felt more pervasively in form of an ideology which challenges the rubric of patriarchy, offers alternate definitions of both life and death, victory and defeat, and many like binaries. With the irresistible flow of the fountain of life the principle breaks the bounds of the apparently fixed structure of the hegemony. What is projected is not the conventional idea like primordial nature versus science/civilization, rather it shows how science is deployed following a specific principle and to attain the specific goal of domination/subordination. The exhibition of power and the irresistible desire to establish the authority are the unalterable characteristic of patriarchy. The machine manufactured by Bibhuti was a conscious conspiracy against nature, a manifestation of man’s wish of sealing paternal authority/ownership upon the process of creativity (imprinting “name”) in various ways: limiting the flow to compensate for the lack of divine/natural power of providing life-giving water on earth, implementing the foundational policy of colonialism of destroying a community’s spontaneous natural resource and self-sufficiency through mechanical force and creating artificial dearth to make them dependent upon the latter. Patriarchy works through prioritizing its interest as it is founded upon domination, not partnership: the victory ride of science to trifles like the spoiling of agricultural lands, materially and culturally destroying the native resource of a class (based on culture, gender and others), making fertile feminine space the tool to fulfil their own need. The effeminized labour community is made scapegoat to the altar of the signifiers’ missionary project and like women, the society-sponsored atrocity is eulogized in glorious annals of willing self-effacement silencing all dissenting voices.

Interestingly, the patriarchal structure faces great challenge in every line of the play without the physical presence of any powerful female figure. the great visionary author introduces a bunch of male characters who uphold the so-called feminine ideology of affirmation of life and of feminist resistance. A new regime is conceptualized: Nobody can hold Abhijit, because the ideal stands out greater than the individual professing and following it. Those love him, both the individuals and the community, are not allowed to die for/with him. but live to embody and concretize the continuum of the principle of life through action.

KEYWORDS: *Absent, Presence, Woman-ness, Nature, Colonizer, Principle of Life*

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INTRODUCTION

The concept that the term gender in general, and “woman” in particular, are troubled terms constantly being relocated in the complex matrix of actual, symbolic, linguistic/cultural, socio historical and many other significances/meanings, is a cliché now. However, a casual reading of the play “Muktadhara” composed by Rabindranath Thakur, struck me forcefully with its power of confronting the readers with an overwhelming consciousness of an absent presence of something/one whose concrete/actual embodiment is interestingly absent in the text itself: it is the femininity/woman-ness.

DISCUSSION/ELABORATION

The character of a woman present in an artistic piece does not only signify a female entity, but it stands for a principle, a varied form of looking-at (representing the author’s perception of femininity), often a tradition, an ideology. The present play does not contain many significant flesh-and-blood women except the figure of a suffering mother and a couple of common female citizens of Uttarkut appearing on stage only once or twice during the whole course of action, but femininity, rather a female-ness, makes the reader conscious of its power through both the ideologies and architectonics of the play. Here the “woman” exists as natural elements, but the presence is experienced more pervasively in the form of an ideology which challenges the rubric of patriarchy, offers alternate definitions of both life and death, victory and defeat, and many like binaries. With the irresistible flow of the fountain of life the principle breaks the bounds of the apparently fixed structure of the hegemony.

In time of the composition of the play, Eco Feminism was yet to be established as a sustained and systematic theory of interpreting literature and life; but the visionary author was able to engage readers with a consciousness, at once ideological and aesthetic in its bearing. What is projected is not the conventional idea like primordial nature versus science/civilization, rather it shows how science is deployed following a specific principle and to attain the specific goal of domination/subordination. Even without entering into the debate whether restricting the free flow of the waterbody through the mechanism of dam disturbs the ecological balance of a place or increases its economic worth, it is undeniable that the enterprise which creates draught in Shvitarai did not result from any unintentional mistake or scientific miscalculation, but the machine manufactured by Bibhuti was a conscious conspiracy against nature. The dam was no scientific (prayas) attempt to the cause of creating a natural environment more habitable for humanity, rather it was a competition initiated against the divinity manifested through nature by the scientist whose forte is technology: “I occupied the rank of the divine” (Translation mine). The exhibition of power and compulsive determination to establish the authority are the unalterable characteristic of patriarchy. From the very moment of history of the disclosure of the fact of man’s role in woman’s miraculous/magical life-giving power, started the process of sealing authority upon creativity, and the realization of an invincible wish to establish man as the “creator”. In the play the tactics of identifying the offspring by its father’s identity gets validated through the act of limiting the flow by the scientist who lacks in the divine/natural power of providing the life-giving water on earth, and thus the handiwork gets imprinted with his “name”.

Beyond the philanthropic and disinterested appearance of the scientific/civilizing mission, the intention of proving its own unparalleled power gets exposed with the exposition of its alliance with a particular interest group. Bibhuti proudly announces that the victory ride of science cannot be stopped by trifling consideration of the harm of cultivation or starvation of few. However, a little later, we come to know that actually as the minister's political strategy failed to subordinate the citizens of Shibtarai, Bibhuti's machine-monster will be engaged henceforth to subdue the unruly free lot in the interest of Uttarkut. Thus, Bibhuti's scientific/political protégé now places him at a higher position than the crown prince himself: from now onward Uttarkut will sing his praise and Shibtarai, in their utter need of food and water (drought and famine created artificially by stopping natural water resource), will either obliterate or will accept the rule of Uttarkut denouncing their desire to make Abhijit their king. The strategy is the foundational policy of colonialism: destruction of a community's spontaneous natural wealth and self-sufficiency with the help of mechanical force to submerge it under the colonizing power and creation of artificial dearth to make them dependent upon the latter.

Patriarchy naturally works its way through prioritizing its interest since it is founded upon the principle of domination, not partnership. It is primarily for the cause of exhibition of power and to subsume the free spirit of the Other, both material and spiritual, that the powerful plunders away their drinking water, blocks their trade corridor on Nandi Sankat. The policy is often implemented in today's economic world: a group/community – mostly less powerful group/community – is strategically made dependent on the more powerful community by materially and culturally destroying the formers' native resource (making them ashamed of their own commodity) so that the other group/community can enjoy "natural choice" facilitating latter's mercantile growth. Thus, the narrow nationalism achieves the mission of its own prosperity by blocking out the way of other nations.

This has been the chief motive behind framing the policy followed from the regime of present king Ranjit's grandfather: the tread corridor of Nandi Sankat was blocked to deter the wool produced in Shibtarai to have access to foreign market through this way. As a result, the treaders of Shibtarai had been compelled to sell the surplus produce to the market of Uttarkut in lesser price and the strategy successfully prevented the former's emergence as an economically independent country. On the other hand, the policy further helped the treaders of Uttarkut make handsome profit by selling things in a higher price both in-land and abroad. In this way, the wealth naturally produced by a community comes under the control of a minuscule few, and, maybe which is why, the colonizing missionaries always sought after fertile and resourceful places and defined them as feminine space that the man/colonizer could subjugate by his power and utilize to serve his interest.

The continuous accumulation of power, achievement and wealth makes the edge of the pyramid ever sharper. The life and labour of the greatest stratum of the hierarchically structured society gets sold out in a negligible price only to fulfil the need of the higher strata. Generically, tragedy demands the sacrifice of the pharmakos so that the destruction of the receptacle of communal sin ensures the advancement of the community or its salvation from the danger of extinction. But here thousands of lives are sacrificed for the interest of an individual's scientific experiment. All the young men above eighteen are assembled furtively and deployed as labourers to build the dam.

As part of the scientific experiment, the dam gets shattered time and again burying the workers under tons of debris. Thus, the community gets sacrificed for the success of the enterprise of an oligarchic few. Moreover, the destruction of the youth smooths the pathway of dominating a nation.

Even after such colossal loss of life, death is hardly acknowledged as death, far less as the state-sponsored/certified genocide. Rather, the power structure compels thousands unwilling youths like Suman to die and to become part of the glorious annals of history: “Their self-sacrifice was not in vain” (Translation mine). The fabrication of a narrative of “self-sacrifice” helps both to cool down the dissatisfaction of the subject to a tolerable limit and to absolve the king of the allegation of exploitation by transferring the wish of the state on to the “sacrificed” lot. On the hip of their so-called “selfless patriotism”, Bibhuti flutters the victory flag of science, and the colonizer Uttarkut fulfils both its political and economic mission. The story of the unidentified victims of the unrecorded state atrocities gets recorded as the history of an honourable patriotic act. A similar logic works when in order to satisfy the need of the proper male members of the family, the female members are deprived of their basic needs and rights and, with a fine trapping of glorification, are deified to the level above the mundane desires. The effeminized labour community is made scapegoat to the altar of the signifiers’ missionary project and like women, the atrocities mobilized by the society is eulogized in glorious annals of willing self-effacement silencing all dissenting voices. Metaphorically the act of blocking the flow of water of the “Muktadhara” or the stream signifies the sealing of the flow of life, its realistic implication is manifested in the creation of the dearth of water needed to quench thirst and to cultivate the lands of Shibtarai, in the demise of Amba’s only son Suman and like. Following another strategy, first the natural water resource of a fertile land is destroyed to make it infertile, and afterwards it is undertaken by the civilization in order to deploy science and technology to re-fertilize. Losing the means of cultivation, the independent farmer becomes dependent. The capitalistic enterprise of expansion of civilization with the help of science/technology takes the control of natural resources to create artificial scarcity, and now the powerless depends on the power-group to be provided with what was given by nature and was cultivated by their own labour. The direct negotiation with nature is now replaced by the intervention of greedy imperialists as farmers are robbed of their right to preserve their own seeds and bound to buy patent/genetically modified seeds (destroying variety, abundance, freedom and creativity embodying the feminine principle of proliferation. Thus, the right to control and manage the reproductive power of both nature and woman is owned by the patriarchal owners’ community and their natural skill and talent are undermined either by lack of acknowledgement or scope of development.

The aesthetics of the play itself presents a fine critique of the patriarchy. The very shape of the machine reminds even the subjects of Uttarkut sometimes of a giant, sometimes of the devils; amongst the various organs, the identification of its lifeless structure with the tongue and denture makes it a living embodiment of monstrous hunger. The gigantic mass challenges even the sky, sun, stars –nature’s creation as a whole, and the maker-scientist enters in A clash between aesthetic and utilitarian motive mixed with pride in mechanical achievement. The foreign traveller experiences a panic attack at its sight, feels an absence of something good, blissful and pious. A doubt pricks into the mind of even king Ranjit about Bibhuti’s sense of discretion and proportion, the unnecessary height of the structure exceeds its practical requirement. Though inflated with the pride of Bibhuti’s scientific discovery and dazed with the dream of the certitude of the future domination of their nation over Shibtarai, the residents of Uttarkut suddenly experience a kind of undefined suffocation. They suddenly feel a presence of almost an unrelieved surveillance, a limitless presence which wants to engulf the whole existence, the omniscient policing ever tightens its fingers around. The whole structure even screens the sky and limits the horizon of vision of the looker- on so that one cannot know the existence of the Other. When the imagery of “loud shout” (translation mine) is used in connection with this mum motionless concrete structure, the silencing of the lilting sound of the “Muktadhara” acquires another dimension. This disproportionate mass devoid of beauty and aesthetic appeal constructed to show off power and pride, exposes the ugly monstrosity of patriarchal hegemony.

Interestingly, the patriarchal structure faces great challenge in every line of the play without the physical presence of any powerful female figure. There are relatively minor female characters like mother Amba and two other female citizens of Uttarkut, but the feminist resistance in the play emanates primarily from more than one male figures. Here the confluence of the principle of nature and the woman make them lose their physicality and get transmuted into ideology. The feminine principles are scattered in every layer of the architectonics of the text. With an unexpected ease, the apparently incompatible and impossibly contradictory ideas become normal and natural reflecting feminine principles: with a subversive logic the glory of demolishing the symbol of human pride becomes greater than building it up, the play proclaims that god's feet fall equally comfortably both in the highway and the alleys. Though for the power mongers it is harder to appreciate the greatness of the noble than to bulldoze the weaker gathering strength from the authoritarian framework, it is reported that the Crown prince was gathering something more than tax from the unruly citizens of Shibtarai -- love. Resisting all attempt to muffle the voice of the artist, the activity of Dhananjoy exhibits that sometimes suffering empowers small people to dare the great. Though a natural leader, he professes no concept of unquestioned leadership but allegiance to the concept itself: (If someone follows you, you may hide or close his way) (translation mine). He professes the creed to encounter the powerful by disproving the efficacy of their instrument of physical torture and denying to acknowledge its fear. His logic is based on the dichotomy between the soul and the body: body gets hurt, scared and flies; if we do not try to counter beating with beating or challenge strength with strength, but alter the narrative altogether refusing its power to hurt us, it will question the legitimacy of the tool itself. Dhananjoy asks his followers to observe and not to undermine the strength of the enemy. This is no weak pleading, but a preparation of resistance on behalf of the softer and heavenly elements on this earth.

The most powerful embodiment of both the feminine principle and feminist resistance is the crown prince Abhijit. He is a foundling collected from the side of the Muktaadhara and he listens to his mother tongue in the flowing of water. The facts signal amatrilineage as, with a subtle aesthetic transmogrification, the stream is often imagined as his mother (especially at the end). While the king believes in the ideology of inducing fear among the distant subjects as the methodology of ensuring loyalty, implementing a subversive strategy, the prince depends upon love which can be gathered only through close contact with them. The clash between the principles of giving and nourishing life irrespective of any made-up categorization and that of controlling and restricting it also introduces the author's favourite theme of nationalism and internationalism/Earthism. Abhijit's decision to open the tread corridor of Nandi Sankat is termed as an antinational move which is actually a valid humane act. If Suman's mother's reading of history directly alleges the state, she is falsely comforted by the king; the uneasiness amongst the citizens of Uttarkut is equally alleviated by promoting a narrative justifying the state policy. it teaches the students the syllogism: the dam is built because it will restrict the flow of water to Shibtarai, because it will entrap them, because they are bad, very bad, because they are not the citizens of Uttarkut who are superior race capturing victory in every battle. Abhijit's action at once is able to defunct the policy of making Shibtarai dependent upon the charity of Uttarkut destroying its self- sufficiency, as well as teach Uttarkut to learn to earn its own living instead of exploiting the colony.

CONCLUSION

Thus, in the present play, the genius of the great visionary author introduces a bunch of male characters who uphold the so-called feminine ideology of affirmation of life and of feminist resistance. The crown prince's powerful voice resonates through the thousand voices even after his physical death in form of an ideology. Abhijit and Sanjoy are the two halves of a single entity, latter waits for him, pleads to sacrifice his life. But he is not allowed to do so since it is only living that

promises the realization of the ideal purchased at the cost of life. A new regime is conceptualized: an ordinary person like Bhanwari refuses to do wrong, not even as part of Uttarkut, because he situates his loyalty to something bigger than narrow national interest, the ethics of humanity. Yet, nobody attains Abhijit, not through anger (opponent), through competition (Bibhuti), through loyalty (people of Shibtarai), or even through love (uncle or Sanjoy). The ideal stands out greater than the individual professing and following it. Those love him, both the individuals and the community, are not allowed to die for/with him. but live to embody and concretize the continuum of the principle of life through action.

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