



Women portrayed as important figures in the face of revolutions in Sunil Gangopadhyay’s novel “Those Days”

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Abstract: The 19th century Bengal was a saga of English colonialists dominating Bengal. It was also the time of Bengal Renaissance which was heralded by eminent social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and many more. While the movement ran with the active cooperation of Hindus but few Muslims like Kazi Nazrul Islam and Sake Dean Mohamed wrote verses to spread awareness. They were all united in their concept of promoting rational thoughts and rebelling against the conservativeness of the parochial society. It was the age of transgression as Hindu elites realised the importance of Western education which puts them at par with the colonialists. Renaissance in Bengal was centered around Calcutta and gained the attention of likeminded people who wanted to bring in changes. With social reformations and abolishment of Sati and polygamy, came acts allowing widows to remarry and have claims upon their husband's property. My paper deals with the response of the female characters to these social reformations that were occurring in the early 19th century Bengal in 'Those Days' which is the translated version of Sunil Gangopadhyay's novel 'Shei shomoe'.

Keywords: Bengal Renaissance, 19th century Bengal, *Those Days*.

Bengal in the 19th century was reeling under the pressure of the British Imperialism which left several impacts upon the Indian society. It was the age of surging *Babu culture* where the rich aristocrats were engaged in all sorts of soliciting activities and liquor consumption was an integral part of it. Keeping aside the tyranny of *Babu culture*, there evolved a class of progressive mindset people who tried to chop off the baseless, meaningless rituals of the conventional Hindu society. The *Brahmo Samaj* came into action under the flourishing supervision of Debendranath Tagore and these like-minded rationalists exposed the manipulative nature of the British rule while maintaining till the end that without the English the social reformations wouldn't have been possible.

The century saw the uprising of 1857 and Bengali literature meant for the common masses came into force. It was certainly a blow to the age-old cryptic traditions and meaningless celebration of rituals. The Permanent Settlement Act introduced by Cornwallis, in 1793, when implemented recognized the *zamindars* as the absolute owners of lands and gave them the complete authority to reign over the common masses. Soon began conflicts and the drudgery of the poor who were exploited by the rich *zamindars* was severely felt by many Indian novelists. Famines struck and locusts ate away the crops but, the famished villagers were forced to pay taxes. Gangopadhyay's novel 'Those Days' is written on such a background and barks about several social issues of the early 19th century Bengal while giving us an outline of the history of Bengal. The most appreciating feature is that he seems to have dealt with significant affairs starting with the Indigo Revolt (*Nil Bidroho*) and heralded the significant uprising of 1857 while briefing about the agony of women and the subsequent Widow Remarriage Act. As the fire of revolutions started to spread all throughout Bengal and, influenced by such drastic steps the women started to answer to the need to change. While some actively participated and accepted the changes brought in, there were yet many who were absolutely unaware of the ongoing revolutions and were completely ignorant of it. 'Shei Shomoi' the original text, has described such socio-political conditions and through its creation of versatile female characters like: the charming Heeremoni and the alluring Kamala Sundori (the prostitutes), Bindubashini (the daughter of Bidusekhar Mukherjee), Bimbabati (an ideal Bengali *ginni*), Thakomoni (the wife of a farmer who went on to become the maid of Singha household) and Kushumkumari (who served as the example of widow remarriage) the author has highlighted the fact that these women had an important role to play. These characters are also revolting and fighting against one common cause; male sub domination and the

hypocritical society. While each has their own inner conflicts, these fictional characters are seen as the prominent figures in the face of revolution.

Bindubashini, the daughter of Bidusekhar Mukherjee hails from a Brahmin family. A witty girl she is substantially different in her eagerness of learning from her other sisters who "lacked her enthusiasm though all of them could read and write." (Gangopadhyay 1982, 24) A dear friend of Ganganarayan, the son of Ramkamal Datta, she finds solace in competing with him and demands equal privilege of education. Married and widowed at a tender age she is forced to endure the compulsion of her strict, ruthless father and the torture posed by Hindu society on widows. Bindu as an educated woman understands the state of denial the women are forced to live in. Soon, she finds a world in her books but even though "Girls in Brahmin households were better educated than in others" (Gangopadhyay 1982, 24) still there was a limitation to their pursuing knowledge. The innocent Bindu demands to know why she can't read Meghdootam while Ganga can and to her utter dismay finds that her wretched father has snatched away her only freedom. The only answer she receives that doesn't pacify her unrest soul is "It is enough for a woman. You don't need-" (Sunil Gangopadhyay 1982, 24). Instead, she is forced to devote her life to the service of Janardhan. The complexity that the society puts in front of the fifteen years old girl leaves her amidst a number of questions and finally she is convinced that the society has restrictions only when it comes to evolution of womankind. Her every day is like *Ekadasi* and suddenly one fine day she finds drops of blood and her mother Soudamini reveals that her daughter has become a woman. However, the author hints that Bindu shall remain untouched by the blessings and joy of womanhood. She on her curiosity to explore the sexual cravings implements them on the idol of Janardhan and her momentous cry of self-pleasure remains as the only shackle

dared to be broken by a widow. The tragedy of Bindu lies in the fact that there was not a single soul to speak and fight back for her. Bindu's fragile protests were silenced, unheard and crushed under the feet of her father. As if her woes and devotion were not enough and while she craved human touch, Ganga offered to quench her thirst of human understanding tried to stand for her and Bindu was sent off to Kashi. No one bothered to find out what happened to her and about her whereabouts. As the novel progresses in a much later part, we find Ganga heading off to Kashi for enquiring about her. After a sequence of efforts, he finally finds her and here the readers are stunned by Bindu's massive transgression into something that the *bhodro samaj* of Hindu elite class would never accept. Bindu is forced to become a *Baiji* something her father had always seen in eyes of discernment. While most of the male inheritors of the rich, elite class found solace and enjoyed the companies of *Baiji*, something that we also come across in novels like 'Devdas', 'Keri Saheb er Munshi' and many others. Liquor consumption was an integral part of the system but Bidhubhushan Mukherjee never indulged in such sorts of atrocious activities but eventually his daughter becomes something that he would never want her to become. When Ganga offers her a promising life with him and gives her a chance to escape from the brothel, Bindu commits suicide. While it was the flicker of love for Ganga that has kept her alive for years but eventually, she gives up. She loved Ganga so much that she was mindful of the society that would pinpoint Ganga; the son of a rich zamindar to bring shame to his family by marrying a widow and a courtesan. It is through her death we are left astounded to her fate and that she succumbs to the pressure of society that neither let her be reunited with her lover and the very God Janardhan whom she worshipped plan for her a life as such. The novel leaves Bindu as the very first women character who dared to raise a voice against the pseudo cultural rites.

Heeremoni was a prostitute, a pretty girl with an attractive figure like an hourglass would manage to embezzle the attention of men and sew broken hearts. Men like Rai Mohan was described as her paramour as they remained swayed away by her slightest touch or song. Where *babu culture* thrives and plays an important part, Gangopadhyay deliberately gives adequate attention to characters like Heeremoni without whom the culture makes no sense. She has a son; we never know who is the boy's father. In the 21st century Heeremoni would have been referred as a single mother as she amazingly raises up her son single handedly and uses her wit to overcome situations. Heere knows that she is a bastard of the society and that she would never be able to occupy a respectable position in the society. Men came to her to satisfy their sexual urge that demands bodily pleasures but at the same time they made sure to not engage her in public situations where their position might be questioned.

"A prostitute's son! What religion or caste can he claim? Who knows who the father is?" (Gangopadhyay 1982)

Here in this novel, we have two types of female characters, one like Bindu who is aware of her social position and hailing from an elite family she never dares to be vocal about her sufferings because she is aware of the fact that her father's reputation would mingle with dirt. While women like Heere is already disgraced by the society and therefore has nothing to worry about or loose. Thus, she raises her voice against the indignities meted out to her as he uses the lashes that society whipped her with to whip it back. She is a fighter much like the protagonist Draupadi in Mahasweta Devi's novel 'Draupadi' and while she perishes her only attempt remains in trying to afford a life better for her son.

The novel incorporates the thought of the Young Bengal Radical 1956, "Women has but one source- Home. The end and aim of her life is to cultivate the domestic affections, to

minister to the comfort and happiness of her husband, to look after and tend her children, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economics" (Gangopadhyay 1982) in presentation of upper class elite housewives like Bimbabati. She is the wife of Ram Kamal Singha, and the mother to Nabin and Ganganarayan. As an ideal housewife, she dwells in the *andarmahal* and maintains the gap between *andarmahal* and the outside world by following the *pardah* system. Her solace comes from attending her household works and supporting her husband who spends his major time in brothels and owes his heart to the languishing beauty of Kamala Sundori. While Bimbabati is aware of her husband's visits to the den of iniquity but like most elite women she dares not question his manliness. Bimbabati's visit to the holy Ganges for her ritual bath causes her to come across Thakomoni and, as the former offers a momentous relief to the groaning women who was mourning over the loss of her child, leaves us to conjure the image of Bimbabati as a Goddesses.

"I hear a child crying. Who is it, Chinta?' Thako's tears were spent by now but Dulal cried on and on. Bimba's heart melt with pity. She couldn't bear to see a child suffer." (Gangopadhyay 1982)

The striking difference lies in the fact that repeatedly Bimbabati has been seen as a pure woman and her close resemblance with the heavenly figure is elaborated further as peasants refers her as *Maa*. While, Bimbabati, maintains her reputation and her conservativeness and never for a moment we expect her to break down the notions of purity as created by men. When at the end of the novel it was revealed that Nabin is the son of Bimba and Bidusekhar Mukherjee, the question of purity comes into action. Bimba has never loved a man other than her own husband who was infertile and thereby couldn't fulfil Bimba's wishes. Bimba's yearning for a child leads to the birth of Nabin Kumar Singha and both Ganga and Nabin fills her breast with love and affection.

Child marriage was a social evil which was quite in force in the early 19th century. Little girls were forced into marriage, often with aged men. Scenes as critical and cruel unfolded when the aged husband dies within few days of the marriage and the girls treated as scapegoats were taken to be sacrificed in the fire along with the body of their husbands. *Sati* was banned with the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Lord William Bentinck. However, a women's affliction never ended as their husbands were indulged in polygamy. Keeping more than one wife was something which was quite common during those days. While men could remarry after the death of their wives, the women couldn't. Sunil Gangopadhyay has sketched this child marriage extravagantly all throughout his novel and as he made sure that the sufferings of these child brides detached from their family at such a tender age reaches the hearts of the readers. Sunil Gangopadhyay has sketched this child marriage extravagantly all throughout his novel and as he made sure that the sufferings of these child brides detached from their family at such a tender age reaches the hearts of the readers. While educated men like Ganganarayan, Nabin and Madhusudhan Dutta resented child brides and remarked them as "a pulling infant, seven or eight years old". (Gangopadhyay 1982) Thus, the tendency to see marriage as means of getting a heavy dowry was transgressed into an alliance for seeking a wise companionship. However, with polygamy being into action *Kulin* brahmans made marriage a trade and often kept several brides like Kalikanta Chattopadhyay who went around his wives parental homes to collect money. This was something which enraged literate men like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar who strongly condemned this practice. With Ishwar Chandra's book 'A Discourse on the Necessity of Introducing Widow Remarriage in Society' it trembled orthodox men, letting in controversies as the pandits who "took up their pens in protest but Ishwar Chandra was ready with his counter arguments and these were simply

supported with quotations from ancient texts". (Gangopadhyay 1982:333) However, Vidyasagar's cause was sustained by the radicals of the *Brahmo Samaj* and the leaders of the *Young Bengal Movement*. This served as a catalyst to the burning sensation of a thousand widows who wanted to revolt but was quietened; afraid that the society would send them to Kashi. As the movement became a talk of the town, the widows came to know about it and they started their protest wanting to be remarried again.

"Yes, Huzoor. Everyday there's a scene. She refuses to go into the kitchen. "I won't cook any more," she says. "I want to get married today. I must have my fun while I can."" (Gangopadhyay 1982, 335) Gangopadhyay here talks about a widowed woman in her 80s who desires to get married again.

While it was rightfully pointed out by the legendary author Sunil Gangopadhyay that a woman could improve herself and her eyes will be opened to the social injustices that she is prone to only if she is educated. He writes "Education would improve her mental powers and she might in time, come to be a true wife- a wife he could respect and love." (Gangopadhyay 1982, 204) 19th century Bengal was a time when the necessary for woman to be educated was a cause for which eminent men and women fought for. Aided by Englishmen like Bethune *saheb*, who himself was inspired by the Feminist Movement in his country; they began to open prospect for urging women to enter the altar of knowledge and be enlightened. With the efforts of John Eliot Drinkwater Bethune, a school for girls was built and women in all households were urged to be schooled. While women too upon seeing education highly priced by their husbands took up to learning for two reasons; predominantly to impress their husbands and secondly to see for themselves the world outside the zenna. While women like Leelavati, innocently repudiates the idea of touching a book under the apprehension that her husband would die!! When Rasundari Devi took up to learning, she was nursing her 12

children and she would pine to read Holy Scriptures while watching her husband recite hymns. She writes in her autobiography that her desperation for reading books made her feel remorseful as society criticized learned women. She writes in her autobiography 'Amar Jibon' about her desire to read that made her rise above religious and social conventions and chase her dreams. She mentions her struggle to read as she quotes –

“I could read (religious books) a little bit. But I did not have free time and more importantly the fear of getting caught and punished was always looming over me. Later on, I decided that I would read “Chetna Bhagat” (a religious book) in the morning when all three of my sister-in-laws were busy in religious rituals. Still, I had to read while I hid in some nook and corner of the house as one of my maidservants kept the vigil.” (Rasundari Devi 1876)

The publication of her autobiography led several revolts and as women started to read as they found a new way of living. Although, Sunil Gangopadhyay doesn't mention Rasundari Devi in his novel but we could easily read characters like Bindu in the light of Rasundari Devi's autobiography.

If the condition of women bettered it is because of the eminence of worthy men who rebelled for changes and ushered by which widowed women expressed their desire to remarry and live a new life. The late 19th century stripped the patriarchal society of its conservativeness when women in every common household started to fight back to be educated, remarried and be given an individuality. and their desires were shaped into reality with the foundation of Bethune School by John Eliot Drinkwater Bethune. The presence of women like Rani Rashmoni, a widowed businesswoman depicted a new independence and individuality of women. While society failed to bring her down, they would try all means to point out at her caste, questioning her religious

rights to build the famous Dakshineswar Temple as the Rani was not a Brahmin. Several priests disputed and refused to hold religious rites in her temple and it was Ramkrishna who agreed to be a priest in her temple. Rashmoni became a figure of protest and supported by a majority she floated on and her intelligence and authority dismantled that of the East India Company's.

Renaissance in Bengal played an important role in the upliftment of women as the out-dated laws and customs were challenged and broken down. The conventional society was marked with changes that paved the way for a new, rational way of thinking. Nevertheless, it served as the stepping stone in the long run of attainment of freedom from the colonizers. Thus, from my research I have explored the fact that although these movements were predominantly led by men but without the participation of women it wouldn't have reached its zenith point.

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