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Delineation of women in Bengali Household: A brief foray into Sailabala Ghosh Jaya's *Janma Aparadhi*.

Brinda Samanta, *Assistant Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College,
Burdwan, West Bengali, India*

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Abstract

Contemporary creative literature always receives an upperhand as it was considered to be the only public discourse that facilitated women specially from Bengali households to give vent to their long-repressed desires. What becomes significant was the 'exodus of Bengali women from the socially constructed invisible confinements that contributed to a great extent to the omission or trivialization of women. Impediments pertaining to fields like education and marriage have given a new dimension to the way women view their life living in these households. This paper explores the scenario of a Bengali household and attempts to understand the issues that contribute to various kinds of treatment meted out to women through the lens of a women, as she pens it down in her much-celebrated work. This paper also explores the way language has been used by a female author which can further our studies into the field of gynocriticism which talks about analysis of literature from a female perspective.

Keywords: Bengali Household, Contemporary Creative Literature, Delineation, Exodus, Gynocriticism, Trivialization

Introduction:

Rightly did Swami Vivekananda point out "Just as a bird cannot fly with one wing only, a Nation cannot march forward if the women are left behind". Etymologically the word 'woman' means half of man. It has been very well illustrated in the 'Nyaya Darshan' that man and woman are closely associated with each other as the soul and body. Therefore, women ought to be respected. Feminist historians who complain about the omission or trivialization of women in traditional history advocate the construction of women's history from their own perspective and collection of information about them primarily from themselves i.e their writings, oral transcripts etc. One can trace the evolution, albeit slow, of new beliefs shaping their goals, attitudes and activities. An attempt to change women's subordination began to emerge in an embryonic form. This paper centres around one such woman called Sailabala Ghosh Jaya who decodes the notion of 'guilt' in her novel *Janma Aparadhi*.

I have relied for sources primarily on her life and her own novel entitled *Janma Aparadhi*.

Contemporary creative culture and imaginative writing by women has always been given importance as it was the only public discourse in which women spoke on issues otherwise not discussed by them. An emblematic example is Sailabala Ghosh Jaya's *Sheikh Ando*, a daring novel which discusses women's sexuality and an attachment between a Muslim boy and a Hindu widow, something which was forbidden in Hindu tradition (Ray 3). While writing this novel, Ghosh Jaya could not assume that her desire to write would be accepted by her extended family. Another significant aspect that almost debarred her from writing novels was lack of support from her in laws. A Hindu woman after marriage is usually taken to her husband's joint family, where most of the time she remains occupied with household chores. She had even altered her name to 'Ghosh Jaya' (wife of Ghosh) to camouflage her identity. Writing for her was a precious source and it is through her writings that she has been able to imagine new collectivities. One can also trace the evolution of 'Gyno criticism', a branch of feminist criticism that focuses on women's art with the aim of developing a 'women's poetics. Not only does it develop women's poetics, it also ensures the articulation of voices hitherto silenced, expressing that which has not been expressed. (Mukhopadhyay 46) Ghosh Jaya was a dynamic lady who endeavoured to show the discrimination and the prevalent patriarchal domination in the society. Ghosh Jaya's undaunted pen has succeeded in upholding the long-repressed desires of women.

1. Janma Aparadhi:

What Ghosh Jaya deals with in *Janma Aparadhi* has received a great deal of attention. The novel revolves around a woman called Opera. A simple, sober and dedicated housewife who hardly objects to what her husband says. Constant subjugation and repeated negligence had rendered her tolerant towards the brutal treatment meted out to her. As the title itself suggests, the purpose of this novel has been to trace the ways a 'woman' is considered to be an 'aparadhi'.

What becomes significant in this novel is the constant fear of Opera of being insulted or rebuked by her husband, Binod. Binod's indifferent attitude towards his wife reminds us of the deep-seated prejudices that are associated with women. Being labelled as an 'aparadhi' (guilty) since birth is perhaps what Opera has also been subjected to and this is what we find dominating Binod's mind as well. His constant insult, repeated negligence during her illness, showing no gratitude and holding back letters addressed to Opera gave him immense pleasure, as the narrator says. According to Binod, this is something that a woman is destined to face owing to the 'guilt' she has been carrying since birth.

Opera's simple yet thought provoking comment 'meyer manusher lekha pora sekhata bujhi boro Aparadh?' (Is it an offence for a girl to seek education?) reminds us of the prejudices that people harboured about educating a female child. Binod's jeering reply, 'je meyemanush lekha pora shikheche, tar ki bhodrostho achhe? Se toh beshya!' (A girl who educates herself is nothing but a 'whore'.) indicates that Opera's husband also belonged to the same category and thought in the same vein. Educating a girl child was not only an offence but also an omen, as it was thought to bring bad luck to the family and at times even cause the death of the husband.

2. Ghosh Jaya's Take on Educating Girls:

This is what Ghosh Jaya had also tried to establish. Education is the only weapon which could help women proceed from a world filled with darkness and oppression to a world

filled with light. The revolutionary zeal that education was expected to inculcate in the minds of the women is also something which needs to be taken care of. Women's education in India found its rapid development in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Sailabala Ghosh Jaya was one of them who developed the process. Coming out of the stereotypical thoughts and positing themselves in a world where enlightenment prevails, is itself like coming out of the 'zenana' that women were subjected to.

The 'pardah' system for girls was considered the worst possible social hindrance for female education. Ignoring this, no appropriate and fruitful way could be identified for spreading female education. Declaring war against confinement or Pardah system could bring no success (Manindranath et.al., 1330, p.82). Besides this, girls were made to leave school after primary education because of child marriage and after marriage they had to stay in the inner part of their house. But comparing to child marriage, Pardah system or confinement was the worst sort of hindrance for female education (General Report 35). To get rid of this condition various thoughts were developed among the missionaries and they started to think deeply and held discussions on how education could be made available to the females staying in the inner part of their house allowing full respect to the confinement System or Pardah system. Thus, they gave birth to a special system of education, 'Zenana education'. The missionaries faced financial crisis while delivering institutional education and at that time a huge number of Missionary Schools closed down due to the scarcity of fund (Murshid, 1938, p.30-32; Sonia, n.d., p.145; Jogesh, n.d. pp.27-29). For this reason, 'Zenana Education' was introduced to the women as a cheap alternative to the institutional education. (Masum 11)

At this critical juncture mentioned can be made of Rousseau's *Emile* where he gives a sketch of his character of woman. Sophia, says Rousseau, should be as perfect a woman as Emilius is a man, and to render her so, it is necessary to examine the character which nature has given to the sex. Mary Wollstonecraft in her much celebrated *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* has critically commented on the verdicts of Rousseau. Wollstonecraft says,

He then proceeds to prove that woman ought to be weak and passive, because she has less bodily strength than man; and hence infers that she was formed to please and to be subject to him, and it is her duty to render herself agreeable to her master—this being the grand end of her existence. (Wollstonecraft 99)

3. Discussion:

In *Janma Aparadhi*, Ghosh Jaya has not explicitly talked about the oppressive treatment meted out to women. Although, Opera is not a direct victim of domestic violence, we can find traces of it in the narrative. Binod's indifferent attitude towards his wife, not giving her proper treatment during her illness, rebuking her saying she has faked her illness are synonymous with the oppression meted out to women. In a country where women were considered to be even worse than a 'shoe' (choti jutaro odhom), where her birth itself is a 'guilt', breaking free of a marriage which brings nothing but misery was still considered to be one of the wildest dreams of many women. True that even Opera once thought of breaking free of this marriage, but she is immediately reminded of the possible consequences associated with it. The

maltreatment reaches its highest development in the 'blow' she receives from her husband which ultimately leads to her miscarriage. It is a sense of wrongdoing associated with 'leaving a husband' that does not allow her to object nor leave her husband forever.

Lack of access to health care, proper education and ill treatment meted out to women is still a pertinent issue in some parts of the world. In this regard, Government interventions in terms of Sustainable Development Goals have played an important role. Issues related to maternity health and gender inequalities form a significant part of these goals.

Goal 5, pertaining specifically to women empowerment and gender equality, has proven to be particularly challenging for many countries, including India. Significant gains have been achieved on a few parameters, such as an improving sex ratio, more girls having access to education and more women serving in positions of leadership. However, these improvements are not reflected in the status of women belonging to the Adivasi and other marginalised communities of the Northeast region. These women, who comprise some of India's most vulnerable and disadvantaged, are subjected to multiple levels of discrimination and abuse, and suffer from abject poverty, sexual exploitation and lack of access to basic healthcare.

Similar reverberations have been found in seminal texts like Bible as well. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar while analysing 'the monstrous Eve' in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* have made a few observations. They argued against the notion that women have always been associated with guilt. They say that Satanic Victor is Eve-like. He is curiously female. He is consumed by a fervent longing to penetrate the secrets of nature. They also say that his 'guilty' observations and his passion to understand the structure of human frame-recalls the criminal female curiosity that led Psyche to lose love by gazing upon its secret face, Eve to insist upon consuming 'intellectual food'. It is precisely at this point that Gilbert and Gubar make a remarkable comment. They say,

If so, it seems likely that what this crucial section of *Frankenstein* really enacts is the story of Eve's discovery not that she must fall but that, having been created female, she is fallen, femaleness and fallenness being essentially synonymous. (Gilbert and Gubar 328)

This comment made by Gilbert and Gubar once again reminds us of the comment made by Opera's husband when she asks for equal opportunities for education. The fact that women are 'guilty' since birth and fallen are hinted at even in Bible. It is Eve who has always been blamed for committing the 'sin' of eating the forbidden fruit. There is always a sense of wrong doing that lurks behind the birth of any girl.

4. Conclusion:

Opera in Ghosh Jaya's *Janma Aparadhi*, the woman that we have been dealing with, belong to a society where women are being questioned repeatedly for the actions they take. Fear of being persecuted, both by the society as well as by the family members refrained her from taking any drastic step. Opera's tolerance towards her husband's behaviour substantiates this fact. Opera is a passive yet sensitive woman. Opera's internalization of the deep-seated prejudices, her husband's indifferent attitude towards her and also the fear of being abandoned did not let her 'come out of her shell'. It is only in her tragic death that she experiences her emancipation. She is no more confined within the imaginary walls created by her husband. She is a free bird, flying higher, without any fear. What becomes a

significant aspect of Ghosh Jaya's writings is emancipation. It is through her undaunted pen that she has been able to emancipate her thoughts and help others also emancipate their thoughts. Through the present study, we have been able to analyse how this almost forgotten yet dynamic author has contributed significantly to the growth of literature. According to me, Ghosh Jaya is a 'must-read' to know how women have been able to discuss issues which earlier remained unnoticed. She has been a source of inspiration to many and will remain so for the generations to come.

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