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Feminine Sensibility in *PatherPanchali*

Nirjharini Tripathy

Lecturer in English
Department of English
Prananath Autonomous College
Khordha Odisha

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Abstract:

Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay is one of the leading writers of Bengali literature. His best known novels are *Pather Panchali*, *Aparajito*, *Aranyak*, *Adarsha Hindu Hotel*, *Ichhamati*, *Dristi Pradeep*, *Chander Pahar*, *Hire Manik Jale*, *Debjan*, *Bipiner Sangsar*, *Anubartan*, *Ashani Sanket*, *Kedar Raja*, *Dampati*, *Sundarbane Sat Batsar*, *Dui Bari*, *Kajol*, *Maroner Danka Baje*, *Mismider Kabach*, *Aam Aatir Bhenpu*. *Pather Panchali*, a masterpiece of Bengali literature, is his autobiographical novel. It was published initially as a serial in a periodical in Calcutta and then as a book in 1929. His wellknown short story collections includes *MeghaMallar*, *Mauriphool*, *Jatrabadol*, *Jonmo o Mrittu*, *Kinnardal*, *Benigirfulbari*, *Nabagata*, *Taranath tantric*. *Pather Panchali* is a beautiful and poignant presentation of human interactions and a simple expression of emotions with a universal humanist appeal. It depicts the story of a poor family and their struggle for existence in a remote village of Bengal. The novel, with no trace of melodrama, deals with the grim struggle for survival by trans-generational women characters in the family.

Keywords: Song, Path, Journey, Women Sensibility, Suffering, Courage, Silence, Free-spirit.

“You cannot find peace by avoiding life.”

Virginia Woolf

The Bengali word *Pather* literally means "of the path" and the word *Panchali* refer to a type of narrative folk song or folk performance, called *jatra*. Hence, the title of the novel *Pather Panchali* means “Song of the Little Road”. This novel portrays the myriad faces of women. We see these women as trapped, conventional, receptive, submissive, silent, conservative, suffocated and compassionate. They also show their other side of being confident, rebellious, defying, courageous, independent, free-spirit, liberal, free-thinking, reinvented and assertive. They rise and shine in strength and power, who prove themselves much more effective and capable than their husbands. Women in this novel are have desires which they try to achieve under any circumstances.

This novel presents a time when women are viewed as being, bound to be submissive and always live their lives in the shadow of their husbands and keep on experiencing pain, insult and suffering silently. They are the victims of male dominance, old patriarchal traditions and social norms. Bandopadhyay has very courageously and sympathetically expressed the plight of these women from the lower section of the society. He has delved into the psyche of these women sufferers and tried to understand their sensibility. These women are from various age groups and have their own problems that they encounter in their everyday life. Bandopadhyay has very vividly described the mental agony of these women.

Credit goes to Bandopadhyay that as a man, he is able to express touchingly and sensitively the deep emotions, expectations, turmoil, desires and dilemmas of the women sufferers through his meticulous, powerful and convincing writing. He has chosen many such themes in this novel which brings into light the age old problems and torture that the women of remote Bengal villages witness. It makes the readers understand and accept the emotional and psychological turmoil which these women pass through in their lives, being born and bound by tradition and social restrictions. A traditional woman is taught to be completely dependent on her husband financially and emotionally. The husband becomes their anchor forever. They cannot even imagine their lives without a husband. That is why they are shattered and broken completely, being deserted by the husband or when the husband dies. The bitter part of the reality is that they are not even taught or trained to run an independent life without a husband. An independent life free from a husband is unimaginable, unthinkable and unacceptable for a woman. Her life starts and ends inside home and hearth.

It meanders through the story of three women from three different generations, as they go on living separate lives, though destiny forces them to take shelter under the same roof. They are: a young Bengali village girl Durga, her mother Sarbajaya, and an old destitute widow Indir Thakurun. The story depicts how their lives are intertwined through the twist of fate and how each struggle and survive, triumph and rejoice, loose and regret and still live a life whose purpose is beyond mere living; and hence the “Song of the Road”, “*Pather Panchali*” continues.

The story is episodic and basically a bildungsroman of the child protagonists Durga and Apu. It is set in the rural Bengal of the early twentieth century in the village of Nischindpur where the family of Harihar Roy lives. It is a tale of a family of dreamers living with their desires, imaginations and hopes. The family includes Harihar’s wife Sharbojaya, daughter Durga, son Apu and his old Aunt Indir Thakrun. The house is an ancestral home of Indir Thakrun. Harihar is a Brahmin priest who has a dream to become a poet and playwright. Though he thinks big, he is not practical in action. He appears weak when it comes to earning and giving a good standard of living to the family.

Harihar, unable to provide a good living to his family, travels to the city with the hope to get a better job and handsome money. He even needed money to repair their dilapidated house. However, things didn’t work out as per his wish and the family suffers with poverty in his

absence. One day, while Durga was playing in the downpour of the monsoon season for too long, catches cold with high fever. She becomes a sufferer of inadequate medical facilities in the village. The fever gets worse and she dies on a stormy night of heavy rain. Harihar returns home unaware of his daughter's death. Sarbajaya's silence breaks down. When Harihar discovers that he has lost his daughter, he cries out in grief. Unable to bear the trauma of the great loss, the family decides to leave their ancestral home and leaves the village in search of a new life. The novel develops the atmosphere for its characters slowly and resolutely. The narration builds up to a great height with a powerful climax as the reader begins to empathize with the characters.

The Suffering Woman, Indir Thakrun

“The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence.”

Sylvia Plath

The woman character of the first generation of this trans-generational story is Indir Thakrun, an old destitute widow; lovable, cynical and storytelling aunt of Apu and Durga. She is wrinkled with age, hunched back, stooped and just too old to walk straight together being burdened of all those lonely and painful years she had left behind her. The novel illustrates the excesses and hypocrisies of 'Kulin Brahmins', a sect of upper caste Hindus who unabashedly practiced polygamy as a way of sustenance. Consequently, the women married to such Kulin Brahmins, often met their husbands twice or thrice in their entire lifetime. These women were taught to worship their husbands and they bore their children at a very tender age. Some were unfortunate enough to suffer the trauma of early widowhood, even before entering youth, because generally their husbands were even older than their fathers. By the time they entered their teenage, they were not only overburdened with the responsibility of a child, but they were also shackled to a lifetime of repentance and bland insipid sustenance. Their fault being to still live while their husbands had succumbed to old age and passed away. *Pather Panchali* criticizes of such Indian culture that practiced misdeeds and adultery in the name of respect and customs and hence tortured the women of the society.

Indir Thakrun, a classic example of this injustice perpetuated by the society, bears testimony to a lifetime misery and suffering. She was married to a Kulin Brahmin, whose face she could barely recall later, because it was hopelessly lost in the debris of her memories, and she mothered a daughter she had with him. She lived the rest of her life wearing colorless clothes and eating a highly bland diet made for widows. Her hopeless and lonely circumstances had brought her to Sarbajaya's house in Nischindipur. She displayed a fiercely independent spirit even though she was widow, alone and physically feeble with old age. She flits in and out of their residence whenever she desires. She even manages to live separately when Sarbajaya goes too far with her taunts aimed at her conduct. She is the embodiment of indomitable spirit who tried to live a life of respect and dignity even without financial, physical and moral support. She constitutes the figure of a strong and courageous woman who conquered her limitations and

triumphed over her weaknesses. One day after a verbal confrontation between her and Sarbajaya, Indir Thakrun leaves the house forever and refuses to come back. After a few days she passes away.

The Courageous Woman, Sarbajaya

“I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.”

Sylvia Plath

Sarbajaya happens to be the woman sufferer of the second generation in the trans-generational story. She is the wife of Harihar, who loves his family very much, but somehow fails to recognize the hardships that the man of the house needs to battle with, in order to run his home and make ends meet and his household suffers from the scarcity of resources. It is Sarbajaya who runs the family, even though she may not be the real bread winner of the house. Since Harihar is away from home on work most of the time, the responsibility of raising the mischievous daughter Durga, son Apu and the old aunt finally falls on Sarbajaya. The limited resources of the house disables Sarbajaya to share her home and food with Indir. Here, we witness the negative nature of her. At times, Sarbajaya's taunts the old woman offensively which forces Indir to leave the house and take temporary shelter in the home of another relative. She sometimes gets irritated with the independent spirit of Indir Thakrun and mischievous nature of Durga. Sarbajaya grows lonely, helpless, frustrated and bitter. It fills her with anger and sorrow and sometimes she breaks down. However, she adjusts and engages herself with the happiness, play and exploration of her children.

She is a simple woman with simple and minimum dreams, i.e. two square meals, to repair the house, send their son Apu to school and find a good husband for their daughter Durga. With the advancement of the novel, most of these dreams are collapsed and what remains etched in the reader's mind is the image of a helpless mother battling against hunger, poverty, destitution, loneliness and weather, in order to keep her children alive. Situation compels her to sell away the things of the house, in order to feed her children. It really becomes difficult to her to arrange a few morsels of rice for her children when her husband Harihar goes to the city to earn some money. Even in such difficult situations she refuses to take any monetary help from the people in the village.

She has been portrayed as a woman of high self-esteem. She is sometimes even mocked by the village women, but she does not give up. She handles the issue tactfully and maintains her dignity. However, she could not fight and win the forces of nature. Storm engulfs the house and it is collapsed. Her daughter Durga becomes a victim of the storm and rain, catches cold and dies. Sarbajaya manages the storm befittingly and saves her son from being engulfed by it. On the one hand, where she knows that the road of life she is travelling is destined with misfortunes

and unimaginable losses, at the same time she is courageous, confident and committed to walk independently and boldly without any anchor of a husband. Later, her husband returns home, but she had already lost her beautiful daughter. But, in this disastrous journey of life she had to sacrifice her daughter Durga.

The Free-Spirited Woman, Durga

“Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no to-morrow. To forget time, to forgive life, to be at peace.”

Sylvia Plath

Durga, a young Bengali girl, the third generation woman character, plays a prominent role in the novel. Her miserable condition and tragic death is the main theme of the novel. She has been portrayed as curious, joyful, caring, cheerful, happy, good, kind hearted, simple village girl who always keeps roaming and gathering in the village. She revels in the small and simple joys and in fact provides joys to other members in her family. She is always hyperactive, bubbling and sociable. She can easily interact and approach anyone in the village whom she wishes to make friendship with. She wants to enjoy her childhood with her friends by organizing picnics, always looking out for fallen fruits to pick up for her grandmother and to collect other goodies. Sarbajaya, her mother always complains that Durga goes around the village like vagabond, keeps roaming throughout the day though she is old enough to be married. She expects her to behave like a young matured woman, spend more time at home and learn house hold works.

Durga is a lovable, affectionate and responsible girl who takes care of her younger brother Apu and grandmother Indir Thakrun. Because of her extremely caring nature, she develops a close bond with her brother. They sit quietly under a tree, run after the seller of sweets, view pictures in a bioscope and watch *jatra* performed by a troupe of actors. The sound of a distant train's whistle delights them very much and every evening they run to the field to hear the whistle and see the moving train. The bond also witnesses gentle teasing between them and the occasional squabble. Durga is a free-spirited girl who refuses to be bogged down by the burden, difficulties and responsibilities of the home. However, the novelist presents certain shortcomings of Durga, and that is her propensity to steal things. If she likes something then she will never mind stealing it away. One such incident mentioned by Bandopadhyay is Durga's stealing mangoes from trees of their neighbor in the village. Another incident being the stealing of bead necklace from her neighbor's house, etc. But she has no bad intention in doing such things. It is the poverty in her house and unfulfilled suppressed desires that compels her to steal the things she always longed for.

The novel presents juxtaposed mother-daughter characters here, Durga and Sarbhoyaya. While Sarbhoyaya is very offensive on the old lady Indir Thakrun, Durga is very sympathetic and shows an affinity towards the old lady. Every time the old lady leaves the house being unable to bear the indifferent attitude shown to her by Sarbhoyaya, it is affectionate Durga who drags her back to the home. One such day, when the brother and sister went to see a glimpse of the train, on their return she discovered her grandmother lying dead. It was a great shock to Durga.

It was a day during the monsoon when Durga was playing in the rain for a long time. She catches cold and gets high fever. Due to inadequate medical facilities in the village, the fever gets high and her condition becomes worse. On such a stormy night of heavy rain and winds, she dies. Her father returns home to discover his dear daughter dead. It is the miserable death of the dearest daughter of the family that forces them to leave their ancestral home. While leaving the house, Apu finds the necklace that Durga had stolen from the neighbor's house and denied stealing. He loved his sister so much that he did not show the found out necklace to his parents and throws it into a pond. This shows his admiration and love for Durga. This secret remains with him forever. Sarbhoyaya's dream to see her daughter's marriage could not be fulfilled because of her untimely and premature death. Even Apu misses Durga every time. While they are leaving the village he keeps thinking of his sister who had a dream to see and board a train.

Durga, the embodiment of holiness of earth, is the sacrifice given at God's altar. This assertion may be juxtaposed with Durga's questionable deeds of stealing fruits and other objects from their neighbor's homes. The journey on the road which the title of the novel justifies the events of Durga's life and her untimely death. *Pather Panchali*, thus depicts the assertiveness of these women who justifies the fact that life will keep moving forward throughout all the trajectories and obstacles of fate.

Summation

Hence, these women characters seamlessly narrate a fragment of their individual lives. *Pather Panchali* therefore displays the power of resilience inherent in every woman. They are the creator, nurturer, preserver who can recreate everything all over again out of broken fragments. The song of the road that serenades the path of human life hums about these women. They ceaselessly keep travelling, march on bravely till their very last breath. They were honest, genuine and true to their journey, and believed that they will not stop and look back, a journey that will end only with death, which they embraced being brave and proud.

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