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## The Search for the Lost Identity in Rajbanshi Poetry

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### **Abstract:**

Identifying oneself with the natural phenomenon is not new in the history of literature; but what new here in the Rajbanshi literature is that here the poets did not stop after identifying the self of their community with the natural phenomena but to rouse the lost consciousness back to the body and the mind of the people of their community. The poets of the Rajbanshi language do not restrict themselves only to relate the search of identity with the cruel, shrewd and cunning aspects of nature; they also presents the soothing and preaching dimensions of the environmental phenomena. The Romantic disposition with the Nature and natural phenomena is well-known. The romantics celebrate it as the part of nature in order to romanticize the feelings they had inside them—to recollect the memory and to establish their ego—making ‘I’. To the Rajbanshi poets, natural phenomena become a strong rhetoric not to establish their egotistical individual self only. Rather a search of objective and collective identity supersedes the subjective contemplation evoking and celebrating the their very environmental, cultural, social, linguistic and economic ‘difference’ as to employ Deleuzian terminology and which leads them towards becoming a ‘Minor Literature’ having infinite ‘possibility’ in Deleuzian sense.

**Keywords: Natural, Self, Objective Identity, Minor, Difference, Possibility.**

Literature of revolt does not contain any romanticizing tendency towards environment and the natural phenomena. As a part of this kind of progressive and revolt literature, the Rajbanshi poetry does not celebrate and condemn the ‘Lucy(s)’ or the ‘Red claws’ respectively. Rather they have a different approach towards the natural phenomena—they employed them as rhetoric while going on a journey in order to find their self identity. Sometimes they have employed the cruel, shrewd and cunning aspects of nature to highlight the deep dark and cloudy gloom of the human mind; and sometimes they have invoked the beautiful aspects of nature to be empathized with their soothing and preaching touch. But they have never forgotten that they

have a deep and deeper intention in their mind—they are the pioneers of the literature of ‘purpose’—the part of a literary and linguistic experimentation which is flowing from the ‘Below’. So, here, the movement is from the ‘Margin’ to the ‘Centre’—a strive to find out a ‘Symbolic centre’ rubbing off the age-old injustices, neglect, deprivation, hatred and oppression cast upon a vast community by the so called mainstream Bengali Tradition. The collection of poems such as— Nikhilesh Ray’s *Kalnattir Kabita*, Santosh Sinha’s *Dotrar Dang*, Shibaprasad Roy’s *Futik Jol*, Pijush Sarkar’s *Amachhama Chan*, Basanta Barman’s *Abhiman* and Abhijit Barman’s *Shak Tulinu Bechhi Kuchhi* etc. contain various rhetorical aspects of environment.

In *Towards an Aesthetics of Dalit Literature* Sharankumar Limbale writes—“ ‘Rejection’ and ‘revolt’ in Dalit Literature have been birthed from the womb of Dalits’ pain. They are directed against an inhuman system that was imposed on them. Just as the anguish expressed in Dalit literature is in the nature of a collective social voice, similarly, the rejection and revolt are social and collective.” (Limbale 31). If we cast a spell on the Rajbanshi literature through different Dalit dimensional lenses, the angry outburst in this literature can be perceived through their employment of natural objects as their tool to be empathized with and to express their sufferings, emotions and the flickers of hope. Nikhilesh Ray’s poem *Male Tree* deals with the life and activities of a fruitless tree which is taking out all the resources of the land, making the land infertile and very uncomfortable for the other useful trees to grow up—

Flowers bloom but no fruit  
Some say this is a male tree  
Since so long he really  
Sucks the water of this land for free. (*Kalnattir Kabita* 20)

This pretending nature of the tree seems intolerable to the poet and he wishes to cut it down with the strike of axe to light up the light of revolution. Rhetorically the poet wants to emphasize on the fact that the age old oppressive and dominating mainstream Bengali tradition and other factors overshadowed the Rajbanshis in their own land for a long time without any sweetened fruit to them and there is, thus, no need of the ‘red flowers’ for twenty years because no one in the land is in the aesthetic mood of celebrating with the flowers—

To the feet of the tree gathered

Knife, khanta, axe and spade  
Making fraud on us every day, you fake tree  
Do you want to survive forever? (*Kalnattir Kabita* 20)

The struggle and misery caused by the naturalized deprivation (at least the oppressors think that it is natural) led by the so called ‘Deoyani’—the leaders who just sucked the blood from the veins of Rajbanshi pride and glory are the reflections in the poem *Stem* by Pijush Sarkar. The leaders took all the benefits and resources from the Rajbanshis gradually making them deprived, isolated and at last a minor community. For the Rajbanshis only the stems of the rice are left—the remaining of their destructed identity—

The hands of leaders took away all the rice  
Now only the barren lands  
And only the rice stems. (*Amachhama Chan* 27)

Thus, the poet is turning the natural phenomenon ‘stem’ into a part of human identity. This insulted identity has now become a matter of shame to the Rajbanshis. They feel ashamed in front of other people to assert that they are Rajbanshis and burn within themselves as evident in Pijush Sarkar’s poem *Dotted Rice*—

You and I all are defeated  
Whose story whom to share  
In the body mind seated  
To feel the heat of despair. (*Amachhama Chan* 51)

Their living is the living to live only; but not having any purpose of their own—living in the utmost scarcity where death does not mean less to life because they sold their identity to some other to be just like the dotted rice having no value—

Deep scarcity, even we live  
Living in death’s door  
We sold our fate  
Dotted rice heaps in the store. (*Amachhama Chan* 51)

Identifying oneself with the natural phenomenon is not new in the history of literature; but what new here in the Rajbanshi literature is that here the poets did not stop after identifying the self of their community with the natural phenomena but to rouse the lost consciousness back to the body and mind of the people of their community. Margaret Atwood in her novel *Surfacing* showed her protagonist left alone into the deep and dense wood and finally she lost her civility and merges herself with that of the trees. In the similar tone the poet Pijush Sarkar in his poem *Meadow Grass* compares his self with the meadow grass—

I'm meadow grass, the child of the soil

My chest drenched with fog...(Amachhama Chan 51)

Then he goes no asking a question to himself—

Who likes to stay in pitch dark for so long? (Amachhama Chan 51)

It shows the sufferings and devastated soul of the community—continually strives to seek the space to breathe. In searching of the same space the poet Shibaprasad Roy in his poem *Marigold* gives the aesthetically sound rhetoric of the flower marigold. The poet wants this flower to bloom in each and every Rajbanshi heart—this is the desire of the poet to see the Rajbanshis with meek, sober and respectful attitudes to other cultures. It is a pleading to enlighten the mind of the Rajbanshis through natural phenomenon for the poet thinks that revolting against the oppressive hegemony is not enough—the revolt within one to make oneself enlightened should be there—

Let the flower bloom in my heart

I ask the flower to flourish

I'll be dear to all

It's my progress I want to nourish. (*Futik Jol* 21)

It is known to the world now that colonialism had a set discourse for making the world subordinated to the colonizer. And the best way to show them that they are inferior is to make them feel that their indigenous customs, cultural habits and traditional values are mal practices and tokens of their incivility so that they feel ashamed of all these instead of taking pride in them. Their self respect would be demolished and they began to be suspicious about their own culture. This also happens in case of the Rajbanshis—they have been continually told by the

other cultures that their cultural practices are mundane and not suitable to the civilized world. As a result, their Rajbanshi pride has become a matter of shame now. But the oppressive discourses did not stop there—they had the deep and full proof intention to suck the blood of the Rajbanshis—in respect of the resources of the land while dominating them. In the poem *Leech* by Nikhilesh Ray, the protagonist, the Father of Kandura was working in the field peeling off the fiber of the jute while a leech sucking blood. He was unaware of the leech having sucked his blood so much and contended its lust to drop off automatically. This unconsciousness of the self is brilliantly captured through the animal rhetoric of the leech—

Kandura's father peels off the jute and the sky is breaking upon his head  
From Kandura's father's thigh goes off beside his leg a filled leech. (*Kalnattir Kabita* 18)

Indeed, for these oppressive tendencies from the neighboring cultures as well as Neo-Colonial Globalized tendencies two things are happening to the Rajbanshis. They are suffering from the existential crisis. Their indigenous core culture is nowhere in practice. And they cannot completely put up with the 'foreign' cultural tradition too. Political intrusion of the foreign elements has disturbed their own socio ecosystem and its cultural environment. They are at the brink of forgetting their own traditional values and placing themselves into a cultural junction where their own cultural contribution is very less. Their imitative and the pleasing adaptation of the 'alien' cultural tradition is very anew – they are getting de-familiarized in their own land and cultural environment as Santosh Sinha in his poem '*That Shrewd Wolf*' basically indicates through an ironical natural animal imagery that globalization is like a shrewd wolf attacking and spoiling our own tradition while blaming that we do not have any cultural identity:

“In the midst of us has returned  
Once again that shrewd wolf  
Who coming to drink water on the upper side of the river  
Is blaming us for spoiling the water.” (*Dotrar Dang* 46)

This way the shrewd nature of the natural world is employed, associated and identified with the Rajbanshi self and to touch upon the theme that the 'difference' of being Rajbanshi and being in a different cultural tradition should be celebrated as emancipated by Deleuze while considering the space of possibility—“life begins with pure difference or becoming, or tendencies to differ—such as the differential waves of sound and light, and these differences are

then actualized by different points of perception: such as the human eye. Our world of beings, the extended term that we perceive, is contraction of flows of becoming.” (Deleuze 126).

The poem *Wood-Worm* by Pijush Sarkar relates the human fate with that of a Sarinda after being devastated by a wood-worm. Here, human body is compared with a log of wood which is demolished slowly by the wood-worm. The self-identity of the Rajbanshi people is anonymous to the Sarinda which has been diminished at the attack of the opportunists and the age old Brahmanic tradition of making them feel that they are from the lower category and they do not belong to the prospective position—

Now I'm alone in desolated land

Just like a broken Sarinda lying there

My body is worm stricken, the fragmented tunes ooze. (*Amachhama Chan* 14)

Thus, a brilliant rhetoric of nature is enumerated by the poet to reassure that identity of the Rajbanshi people back from that lost maze of the other dominating communities of the world. In the same way, Avijit Barman in his poem *Raven* hints through the animal imagery at the ingratitude nature of the refugees who once had come to their land and got the hospitable simplicity from the sons of soil and later they turned the wheel over the Rajbanshis with their raven like clever nature—

The raven coming to the yard

Had devoured the corns from my hand

I searched for it

But why aren't its traces there in my land? (*Shak Tulinu Bechhi Kuchhi* 44)

But the poets of the Rajbanshi language do not restrict themselves only to relate the search of identity with the cruel, shrewd and cunning aspects of nature; they also presents the soothing and preaching dimensions of the environmental phenomena. For instance, in the poem *Dove's Nest in the Pomegranate Tree* by Avijit Barman, a natural phenomenon, dove is giving lesson to the human being. The poet looks at the dove sharing foods to its young children and the young too share their food without any quarrel—

Sitting near the dove

I'll share my pain

Solely to laugh. (*Shak Tulinu Bechhi Kuchhi* 49)

Here, the poet cast a clarion call to his fellow Rajbanshis to be united and this way they can achieve a united ‘voice’— a ‘voice’ that will have a strong impact upon the others to get an identity of their own. Otherwise, their voice would be unheard and they would never achieve a voice of their own as said by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak—“the subaltern cannot speak” means that even when the subaltern makes an effort to the death to speak, she (here the Rajbanshis) is not able to be heard” (Spivak: 292). The employment of natural rhetoric as a preacher is also found in the poem *The Cry of Owl* by Shibaprasad Roy. A natural phenomenon, owl is used here to awake the stupor persons—

In the hole of a tree the owl has coiled up its body  
 And is singing in this mid night  
 To awake me. (*Futik Jol* 18)

It is a relation and actuation between the natural consciousness and the human consciousness in order to make the people aware of their own identity and past historical consciousness which they had lost long before.

In the poem *Myna* by Santosh Sinha, the poet identifies the Rajbanshi people with a myna which is in very wretched condition and becomes very aloof and rootless in its own land. It has to steal food from that home yard where once it had played with its mates—

Kanu saw, a lonely myna hiding itself in the shadow  
 Silently keeps an eye on the bunches of the rice  
 Very cautious! (*Dotrar Dang* 38)

The ironical representation of the bird is really thought provoking and is a jerk to the stupor and complacent Rajbanshis. Along with the ironical representation of the environmental rhetoric, the poet Nikhilesh Ray in the poem *The Cotton Pigmy Goose* presents a soft and meek recollection of those Rajbanshi days when they had their own identity; and he does this through the memory of a cotton pigmy goose. Once the poet’s elder sister made that cotton pigmy goose and kept that there on the wall of the house. But now no one is there beside the goose to appreciate it—it is left alone—

Cotton-soft and cotton-white that cotton pigmy goose  
 Sobs at nights and for the years. (*Kalnattir Kabita* 28)

It actually is a symbolic representation of the poet's memory of the glorious old past of the Rajbanshis. But now the practice of taking pride in this culture has gone far away—although some practices are there in the form of malpractice.

Another natural phenomenon in this land is river. From the time immemorial the rivers Teesta, Torsha, Mansai, Mechi, Kaljani and Mujnai are sharing and empathizing with the grief and pain of the Rajbanshis. In the poem *The Blue Water of Teesta* by Basanta Barman, all the sufferings of the Rajbanshi people are associated with the blue water of Teesta. The river has been empathizing with the plights of the persons inhabiting beside it. They are suffering a lot for their lost identity after becoming refugees to their own land and a matter of joke to other cultures, tolerating insulting attitudes and sympathy from the outside and sometimes getting the romance with root from their own community too. All these make the Rajbanshis cry like a caged bird and the drops of tear are flowing as the blue water of river Teesta—

The caged bird cries hard  
Flapping the wings ruffles the cage  
Lays unconscious by getting the strike from the bar  
And there flows from the eyes the blue water of Teesta. (*Abhiman* 19)

In another poem *The Riverbed of Mechi*, the poet shows that his identity is at the same level with that of the nature—he merges his self with the self of nature—that he an inseparable part of the riverbed of Mechi. His self is replete only when he feels the presence of the pebbles on the river which flows through his body. It can never be separated and made aloof by anything—any force and evil power from the outside—

The Riverbed of Mechi, you are my life nights  
My heart is replete  
With your sands-reeds and water. (*Abhiman* 13)

This tradition of searching the identity accompanied with natural phenomena continues in another poem of this poet—*The Spot of Water*. The poet is asking the cloud of Dooars to tell him his address, his destiny and destination—that is his own self—

To the hill men of Tarai and Dooars  
And the silvery cloud, I speak  
None knows your address. (*Abhiman* 48)

The despair of not asserting themselves as who they really are is also presented through the natural rhetoric in the poem *False River* by Pijush Sarkar. The Rajbanshi dream of standing face to face with the world and talk to them with their own pride, own language and cultural values is now turning into the maze of changing phases within the community itself because of the contemporary political, environmental, social and economic changes around and inside the land. And the poet chooses to express that despair through the natural phenomenon with the imagery of a river flowing from his eyes—

The river is on my bed  
Water beside the pillow.  
Flow from the two sides  
Bunches of dreams. (*Amachhama Chan* 34)

In the similar note, the articulation of despair is also noticed in the poem *O River* by Abhijit Barman:

The river flows from the eyes  
Towards the land. (*Shak Tulinu Bechhi Kuchhi* 53)

But sometimes the poets also use the vigorous and powerful flow of the rivers of this land as a rhetoric to express their revolting spirit as evident in the poem *Let the River Loose* by Santosh Sinha. The Rajbanshi self which has been restricted from so long is compared with a barred river. The flow of the river has been chocked. The poet is urging that the river should not flow from the eyes; rather it should flow from the eternal spirit of chainless mind to create a revolutionary zeal among the Rajbanshis. It needs to flow or else its source would be dried up—

I've said nothing till today  
Now let the river loose  
If you fasten it up in the knot of memory  
Else its source would dry! (*Dotrar Dang* 48)

The Romantic disposition with the Nature and natural phenomena especially with the moon is well-known. The romantics celebrate it as the part of nature in order to romanticize the feelings they had inside them—to recollect the memory and to establish their ego—making 'I'.

But here in the poem *Crescent Moon* by Pijush Sarkar, we find that the half crescent moon is not glorified and escorted with the escapist feeling of the poet. Rather it has become a symbol to ensure that his identity has been crushed and belittled with all the power binaries and discourses exercised over them by the other dominating societal framework. So, like the crescent moon which is now coming out of the clouds, the poet, too, wants to hold his head high to get his identity back within himself. It is not only the identity – rather an enigmatic self assertion within the self itself—

As the crescent moon holds her head high from the clouds

Likewise I hold my head high, within the self of mine. (*Amachhama Chan* 21)

Thus, it is evident that deal more with the subject matter than to celebrate the egotistical sublimic nature of the romantics. Here the poets are not after making their figure, they are writing in the same space, sharing the same purpose and the poem is the matter of importance that can lead them towards a greater ‘possibility’. In this way Rajbanshi literature conforms to the notion of ‘Minor Literature’ as discussed by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*—“The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value. Indeed, precisely because talent isn't abundant in a minor literature, there are no possibilities for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that "master" and that could be separated from a collective enunciation. Indeed, scarcity of talent is in fact beneficial and allows the conception of something other than a literature of masters; what each author says individually already constitutes a common action, and what he or she says or does is necessarily political, even if others aren't in agreement. The political domain has contaminated every statement. But above all else, because collective or national consciousness is "often inactive in external life and always in the process of break-down," literature finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation.”(Deleuze and Guattari 17)

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