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Tradition and Modernity: A Study of the Articulation of Feminist Modernity in Nirad C. Chaudhuri's *Bangali Jibane Ramani* (Women in Bengali Life)

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Abstract

Nirad C. Chaudhuri has always been the sentinel of abounding controversies especially pertaining to his autobiography's dedicatee. But there exists a rich corpus of his works in Bengali where he succinctly explores various themes pertaining to Bengali life in the early and late nineteenth century. This work of his, '*Bangali Jibane Ramani*', serves as a point of converge in the women's question in Bengal (as Partha Chatterjee had masterfully enunciated) primarily in the scenario of literature and cross-cultural literary influences. Through this particular text of Chaudhuri's, the question about the nascent transvaluations about the engaging transformations of the alternating role of 'as the alter ego' of her male counterpart emerges in contrast to the rather restrictive inclusionary secluded mode of patriarchal domination which pervaded the feminine microcosm before the advent of modernity.

This work does not exactly touches the women's question as such but rather the changing contours of the literary portrayal of the 'feminine' in a society which had been entangled under the reels of a colonial ages just a century ago. In a co-incidentally equivalent scenario, the portrayal of the feminine, though gushing forth in sublime beatitudes, still is in the process of reeling underneath the patriarchal values, enunciated by her male counterpart. The cardinal purpose of this study is to offer an alternate feminist reading of a work pertaining to late modernity wherein a fundamentally poignant structural episteme was enunciated so as to provide a new framework for approaching this question. Chaudhuri's approach to the question reveals his dependence on literature as a mode of understanding the changing contours of feminist consciousness and also the drawbacks of such a kind of over-reliance on a literary constructs and its innuendoes.

Keywords- Colonialism, Feminist modernity, Romantic love, Female subject

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Introduction

The question of analysis of different genres of literature through the lens of different kinds of conceptual and ideological frameworks paves new ways towards the enunciation of newer kinds of understanding and interpretation of the texts under discussion. Feminism, as a categorical framework, provides a very rich avenue to investigate hitherto obscure works which did address the crucial question about the connection between colonialism and its relation with the advent and adoption of newer modes of addressing social and political question on the part of the colonised in the context of South Asia. Within the overarching framework of Feminism, the figure of Nirad C. Chaudhuri cuts a very elusive figure, both because of his advocacy and vindication of the colonial connection but also as an engaging publicist who delved on social history. The work of Chaudhuri, titled '*Bagali Jibane Ramani*' which falls under the purview of the current paper is a kind of text which reveals the subtle layers of nuances associated with the question of the 'articulation of the female subject' in the realm of Bengali literature in the early nineteenth century and Chaudhuri's own perception of the question.

It must be said at the very beginning that Chaudhuri disavows that what this work does not preclude within its precincts. Firstly, it is not a social history which addresses the question of the relative position of women in society. It does not purport to be any kind of sociological analysis. And secondly, this work simply does portray the changing contours of the articulation of the female category within the domain of literature.ⁱ And herein precisely lies the ambiguity associated with this text because the very title tends to send misleading messages to its prospective audience. Our author states his apologia regarding the *raison d'être* pertaining to the work solely lies in analysing the 'man-woman' relationship (both in the literary and in the actual realm) and its transformative ramification that took place in colonial Bengal.ⁱⁱ But that is not the sole question which he proposes to take up. He very emphatically states about the ever presence and ever recurring colonial connection which made possible the rise of a new defining mode of discourse whose emergence was made possible solely due to its sometime enthusiastic and somewhat gratuitous adoption by the new class of educated Bengalis. The question regarding the new mode of 'discourse primarily related to the creation of new literary genres in the vernacular Bengali language which hitherto had no existence before the colonial conquest, most important being the deliberate enunciation of a veritable prose literature.

The question regarding the author's intent becomes somewhat more complex and problematic when the author liberally bestows on his readers a plethora of quotations from passages from early nineteenth century Bengali novels so as to propitiate his point. The centrality of the feminine subject as a category both in the realm of literature and in actuality purports to be the author's prime theme of enquiry. The approach of the author seems a conundrum with the old adage literature reflects the societal actualities, in a veiled form perhaps, but nonetheless, the fictional element does not completely supersede the 'realistic'

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aspects. The author also brings forth the question of love as a new category which emerged in Bengali literature as a consequence of the influence of a culture of systematic perusal of 'western literature'. The main thrust of the author is that romantic love as a distinct category saw its advent both into actual life and literature as a consequence of this colonial connection and the absorption of the literary themes and models of the colonisers by the a newly emerging colonised native elite who took it upon themselves to renovate and overhaul their entire literature on the model of the colonizers without of course, abandoning their native traditions. Herein, the question of the various ideologies (of various provenances) emerge, because the inclusionary and exclusionary aspects would be done on the basis of some superlative and imposed doctrine whose rationale would govern the transactions of this project of literary enunciation and appropriation.

But how does the women's question fits in within this overarching project? When the question is first raised, it primarily refers to the various ramifications which colonial legislation brought within the sphere of matrimonial consent and the 'nationalist' reaction to the intrusiveness of the colonial state within the hitherto secured precincts of the 'inner domain' of the colonised. Here, in the instance of Chaudhuri, his stance is somewhat esoteric and unique. For him, woman, even in her triumphal enactment, remains amerey an appendage of man and her autonomy for expressing her own 'femininity' and other aspirations are merely a kind of veritable *faux pas*. For Chaudhuri, there is a shift from the domain of the personal to the domain of literature (in this instance, nineteenth century Bengali literature), for he posits that only through the perusal of the transformations which occur in the literary domain can one envisage about the changes which had taken place in its societal counterpart. For instance, when he states that Bengali society before advent of the western influences, was largely deficient in domestic charms associated with man-woman relationship and was completely devoid of any kind of *noblesse oblige* and any sort of aesthetic candour. (Chaudhuri, 1968, 46).ⁱⁱⁱ

Chaudhuri and the question of the female subject under the aegis of colonialism

The allegedly unsophisticated and rustic nature of conjugal life and its concomitant social interactions draws froth Chaudhuri's ire. Where does the crudity lay? Here the question gets juxtaposed with the prevalence of the various societal practices and mores of the likes of polygamy, child-marriage etc. Chaudhuri's repulsion from the pre-colonial society in Bengal lies in his apparent distaste from the then prevailing societal norms. Along with this, he characterises this society as being full of moral turpitude and thus imposes almost a kind of blanket denunciation over that society's alleged lack of 'moral' values. This lack of values largely implied with the what he considers 'improper', 'gross' and 'vulgar' conduct prevailing in the male-female relationship. But here also the examples which he uses to support and substantiate this hypothesis of his are again taken from literature with some isolated smatterings from newspaper reports and reminiscences of colonial observers,^{iv} and the moot point is that colonialism led to the enunciation of something some of upward reach

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especially in social relations in the sphere of the household. Chaudhuri is very careful to lay down the dichotomy which presages these changes and its alleged causes. He looks upon the interventions of colonial legislation upon the imposing new laws governing the social relations among the colonized subjects and somewhat peripheral, though of course, pregnant with many serious consequences. What brought forth a real change towards attaining ideals of tranquil domestic conviviality was the influence of 'western literature' and this brought about an endeavour to bring forth some transformation 'from below' which is envisaged and enunciated by the colonized who are desirous of imbibing the social mores and customs of the colonizer. As in all colonizer-colonized dichotomy studied within the domain of colonial power relations, there exists an 'ideal' to be emulated and for that attainment of that ideal in a society radically different from the ideal's one, necessary reforms and conscientious actions stroked the need towards the final consummation. It is quite interesting to emphasise that Chaudhuri's repeated emphasis on the changing consciousness regarding male-female relationship that it was the Bengali male's imagination was fired up and got tantalised due to his exposure to 'western literature' and that the repercussions of that neo-male virtuoso feel on her female counterpart as a presentation to a benighted person.^v It is perhaps most surprising that Chaudhuri is very reticent and almost silent about the accomplishment of 'actual' women belonging to the said period (early nineteenth century Bengal) in various spheres (including the literary) who flourished in actual life. It is quite ironic that Chaudhuri's vision is merely embedded towards appropriation from a few of his selected authors whom he pre-eminently places over others and to whom he confers supreme importance and heralds their literary work as being the exemplar of cardinal influence throughout the literary scenario of the said period.^{vi}

By means of a critical perusal of this text, it becomes quite certain that question of the enunciation of the articulation of the female subject is solely relegated to the literary scenario. It does not necessarily imply that this is some of kind of *idée fixe* but the implication is that the 'female subject' (rather what is considered as its 'ideal' culmination) is only brought forth, envisaged and its literary refinement is solely done by the means of 'male authorship'. This implies that without the overarching supervision or guidance from her male counterpart, the native Bengali female as a subject is devoid of free and creative expression and thus she is perpetually bounded and confined within the hierarchical frontiers of male patriarchy.^{vii} Most astonishingly, this dichotomous relationship does not get extended to the society of the coloniser's home country (Britain, in this instance), as if there are different criteria of literary appreciation and criticism for native female authors and female authors from the realm of the colonizer. It is interesting to note that Chaudhuri lays great stress on the Bengali novelist, namely Bankimchandra Chatterjee to substantiate his thesis regarding the creation of a new intellectual milieu within the realm of the literary as a consequence of literary imitations from the west. As Chaudhuri reiterates,

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The history of love in Bengali Hindu society is fairly well established. It was introduced from the West much later than tobacco or potatoes, but has been neither acclimatized as successfully, nor has taken as deep roots, as those two plants. We in Bengal began to deal with love from the literary end. That is to say, at first it was transferred to Bengali literature from English literature, and then taken over from literature to life. As a result of this double transplantation, the plant remains delicate, and a hothouse atmosphere is needed for its survival.”^{viii}

The very delicate nature of this kind of trans-cultural exchange whereby ideas derived from literature from the coloniser’s society is willingly imbibed by the self-proclaimed *crème de la crème* of the colonised calls forth for analysis, especially when the question of ‘love’ and its concomitant issue, the category of gender, comes into fore. He goes to sate about how the influence of the Shakespearean plays (most notably ‘The Tempest and Romeo and Juliet’) had shaped the youthful Bankimchandra Chatterjee’s imagination and had led to his adoption of certain dictions and imageries for inclusion in his novels. But the prime question of gender again remains elusive. For Chaudhuri, Chatterjee remained the procreator of the notion of ‘romantic love’ in the realm of modern Bengali prose. It might be asked why the centrality of Chatterjee and not some female author when the question of ‘love’ is raised and looked at with ambiguous askance. How about the inclusion of Toru Dutt (1856-77) within this canon of literary artists? It can be ascertained that despite the ambiguity laden with the theme of ‘romantic love’, Chaudhuri is astonishingly silent about adding within his imagined literary entourage of eminent writers any woman author contemporaneous of that era which he is describing. After all, the important question in this regard is not about the advent of the notion of ‘romantic love’ within the domain of Bengali literature but rather Chaudhuri’s own perception of this theme and about how Chaudhuri’s attempts to provide an alternate reading of the literary effulgence associated with the said period. This kind of ambiguity continues to perpetuate throughout the work. Nowhere can be perceived any slight inkling about the autonomy of the feminine as the creator of a sovereign genre of literature which though co-existing with the mainstream yet retaining a specific fervour of its own. Of course, it would be an aberration to expect that Chaudhuri should have had addressed such themes because his self-proclaimed task was not about discussing the role of women writers of the said period but rather how human relationships (especially on the plane of gender) underwent a decisive and fervent transformation as a consequences of introduction of western literature among the educated classes of native Bengal. The cardinal question in this regard is the portrayal of the gender roles in literature and choices which went behind regarding the choice of such quotations from nineteenth century Bengali novels and plays for vindicating his point of view. The feminine is worthy of admiration and respect but very seldom to be emulated. Chaudhuri is of the opinion that a new transformation came into regarding the enunciation of a new stream of consciousness about man-women relationship both within and out of wedlock. And what does contours of this transformation consist of? For Chaudhuri, it lies towards a new

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kind of veneration for the female, a sort of thing which was hitherto conspicuous by its sheer absence in the Bengali vernacular literature pertaining to before the advent of colonialism. But even then, despite all the pageantry of panegyric euphemisms, the feminine subject always retains her abject status as an object of ratiocination and discourse (of various sorts) on the part of her male counterpart. Even the newly accorded respect found for the feminine receives its sacrosanct vindication from the agency of changing attitudes of the male towards his female counterpart. The benevolence of the male is exalted at the expense of the earlier depraved situation of the female, now slightly uplifted due to the new imbuelement of cultural influences from the west.

Conclusion

The entire articulation of the female subject in this work by Chaudhuri and how societal transformation were brought about (even if at the very fringes among the native Bengali elite) tends to raise a variety of questions, especially about the author's approach to the question and the methodology of his solution. As had been mentioned before, Chaudhuri does not envisage treating the question in a sociological manner or even disagrees that it is a historical treatment. His approach is a curious juxtaposition of convergence between critical literary surveys along probing their historical veracity by contrasting these literary sources with the ones from pre-colonial Bengal, thereby showcasing a point of convergence when the advent of colonialism paved the way for a drastic change. But confining such analysis merely to the literary scenario means deliberately setting bounds for some kind of flagellation mode of inquiry which gets disrupted at minor stages only due to the simple lack of perspective. This lack of perspective on the part of Chaudhuri can be filled by approaching the question of gauging knowledge about the articulation of 'sexuality' under colonial aegis in the realm of scholarship. How can the category of 'colonial sexuality' be applied to address the missing links which Chaudhuri had gratuitously left unaddressed? Another question which is also important in this regard is the issue of the 'imaginary construct' emanating from the domain of the literary because without resorting to the accumulated archival 'knowledge' pertaining to colonial Sociology, the questions which Chaudhuri tries to answer simply gets bogged down into a kind of insubstantial swamp where the only possible recourse seems to be getting one's way out of the morass by means of merely quoting from contemporaneous literature. As Philippe Levine argues,

It is, through, the differentiation, between the respectable and unrespectable woman, with which I am here concerned. Closely tied to the hunger for knowledge of 'native' life was a thorough -going if not always effective codification of law in India, a process which relied substantially upon this empirically derived knowledge in its understanding of the possible and the desirable in law. ^{ix}

Colonial sociology had a decisive role to create the designation of 'gentleman' or 'canaille' among the colonized denizens for the purpose of imperial statecraft. But the prime question regarding the colonized Bengali women's liberation from the so-called archaic modes of pre-

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colonial existence to the alleged blandished refinements of colonialism is an issue which has to be addressed so as to comprehend the missing gaps in Chaudhuri's limited way of approach. What Chaudhuri has ordained as the redeeming virtues of 'western education, Partha Chatterjee has dubbed as the 'bourgeois virtues of orderliness, thrift and a sense of inculcation of discipline. ^x What this signifies is that there went a transfer of cultural norms and values from the outer domain to the inner domain by means of the western-educated Bengali husband to his bride and herein precisely lies the difference with pre-colonial times. The Persianiata culture vary rarely travelled into the domestic household of the petty functionaries at the rock bottom functionaries of the Mughal bureaucracy even though the men folk were supposed to be in conversant with its uses and norms. With the advent of the colonial regime, this new wave of acculturation of the colonized native female through indigenous means is what Chaudhuri extols as the prime characteristic feature which led to a drastic surge towards creating some intellectual refinement in Bengali social life. But gain, this new status and acculturation bestowed upon women does not necessarily mean that the traditional gender roles and patriarchal hierarchies has been somehow reversed or at least mellowed its blatant discriminatory features. Quite the contrary, as Chattejee again notes,

The need to adjust to the new conditions outside the home had forced upon men a whole series of changes in their dress, food habits, religious observances and social relations. Each of these capitulations now had to be compensated by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of the women. They must not eat, drink, or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals which men were finding difficult to carry out, they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin to which men could not now devote much attention. The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, yet entirely legitimate, subordination. ^{xi}

Herein precisely lies the dichotomy between the newly conferred reward of privileged feminine servitude and the actual benefits who the feminine managed to secure within the narrow confines of the inner domain, because as a consequences of this acculturation, from Chatterjee's point of view, the servitude of the native Bengali 'educated' female get even more buttressed under more severe forms under the guise emancipation! And this is a point which Chaudhuri had completely ignored in his study. If the emancipator aspects merely tend to reinforce and reiterate the existing gender relations then certainly, all this acculturation of western traditions solely served to even bind the colonized native Bengali female even more into the shackles of a new kind of subordination enjoined and articulated by means of the precocious idea of the bestowal of new responsibilities for women.

What sort of advantage get it be accrued by investigating the notions enunciated by Nirad C. Chaudhuri in this work of him? Apart from his endeavours about completely

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ignoring the question about the relative denigration of women's position in society in Bengal under colonial aegis, what is more interesting is precisely the things which he excludes and includes in his analysis. Analysing social realities by means of sole side-glance at a very selective genre of prose and poetry would certainly tend to reinforce the stereotypes about the so-called traditional roles of the male and female in society. Another significant exclusion is that lower class women which seldom seems to occur throughout his analysis and that too with derogatory overtones.^{xii}

Thus, the treatment accorded by Chaudhuri to such kind of socio-political phenomenon does seem to be guided by a remarkable degree of over-reliance on literary sources and a complete avowal of refusal towards any kind of rapprochement with the subject in a more nuanced fashion. But what it does represent is the subtle articulations of man who fervently adheres to the discriminatory societal norms of domestic bondage despite the having his location straddling between the vast swatches of post-colonial South Asia and later, Britain.

Notes

ⁱ Chaudhuri, Nirad C. *Bangali Jibane Ramani*. (Women in Bengali life). Calcutta: Mitra & Ghosh, 1968. P. 6.

ⁱⁱ Ibid. 8-10. Chaudhuri is very clear and emphatic about what constitutes 'civilization' and what does not and sets upon himself the task of engaging the subject a publicist engaged in a subtle polemical discourse so as to reinforce his point of view.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid., p. 46

^{iv} Ibid., pp. 39-40. Chaudhuri draws forth some descriptions of some amorous scenes from Bharatchandra's poem 'Annadamangal' and takes the author's description of domestic conjugal relations as a single benchmark through which an entire societal realm can be judged. Chaudhuri's absolutist notions of a plague like all engrossing vulgarity affecting the entire pre-colonial society seems to merely ignore the historical narratives of the period.

^v Ibid., pp. 102-4. Here he brings forth the enunciation of the idea of courtship and how this peculiar custom secured its place among the educated Bengalis. He draws forth numerous references from Tagore's novel 'Gora' where to illustrate his point, the conversations between the characters Benoy and Lalita are held as quintessential instance of the *beau ideal* of courtship when done by natives.

^{vi} Pp. 105-11. Here, Chaudhuri lays emphasis on the Bankim Chatterjee's role in creating the stage for the advent of a romantic hero and heroine in the native literary scenario on the lines of Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe*. In fact, Chaudhuri calls Chatterjee's maiden Bengali novel, *Durgeshnandini*, as the best and prime exemplar of the nascent robust beginnings of the advent of romantic traditions in the vernacular Bengali prose literature.

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vii Ibid., pp. 98-99.

viii Ibid., pp. 105-6.

ix Levine, Philippa. 'Reconstructing Feminities: Colonial Intersections of Gender, Race, Religion and Class, *Feminist Review*, No. 65, (Summer, 2000), pp. 6-7.

x Chatterjee, Partha. 'Nationalism and Colonized Women: The Contest in India. *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No.4 (Nov., 1989), pp. 628-29.

xi Ibid., pp. 630.

xii Chaudhuri. Pp. 28-29. Chaudhuri's vision seems to preclude the dire predicament of the lesser privileged females and he imbues them with every passable attributes which he considers socially damnable.

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